

She didn't want to become an adult.  
They were arrogant, forced their self-centered reasoning on others, and kept repeating stupid excuses. And, they tried to coax children by using transparently cheap logic.

But, she wanted to become an adult quickly.  
She was much too weak, pitiful, and didn't have the means to fight. She knew that at this rate, she would suffocate in this small town and die.

She wanted money.  
She didn't have anywhere to go, and she wanted to run away to somewhere else.

Two thirteen year old girls like that met.  
Yamada Nagisa— Living in a remote, country area, a realist who wants to graduate quickly and go out into the world.

Umino Mokuzu— A slightly strange transfer student who insists that she's a mermaid.

The two exchange words, breathe the same air together, and let their thoughts run. Everything is for the sake of living, for the sake of surviving—. This is a small story about these two. A dark mystery about youth!

Illustration: muu

Cover Design: Kikuchi Hakatoko (Berth Office)

# 砂糖菓子の A Lollipop

## 弾丸は or 撃ちぬけない A Bullet

桜庭一樹  
Kazuki Sakuraba

FM38-06  
500

砂糖菓子の弾丸は撃ちぬけない  
A Lollipop or A Bullet

桜庭一樹



FUJIMI  
MYSTERY  
BUNKO



ISBN4-8291-6276-7

C0193 ¥500E

定価：本体500円(税別)

富士見ミステリー文庫  
桜庭一樹作品

さくらばかすき ●ファミ通えんため大賞出身。ノベライズからオリジナルまで幅広く執筆。GOSICK—ゴシック—を中心に執筆中。忘れていた記憶の欠片がふってきて、形になるときがある。速い音の友人のことを夢の中で思い出して、でも朝には忘れてしまう。そんな感覚——。少しはにかむように笑って、本作の原稿を渡してくれました。

B-EDGE AGE 獅子たちはアリスの庭で

B-EDGE AGE 獅子たちはノアの方舟で

GOSICK —ゴシック—

GOSICK II —ゴシック・その罪は名もなき—

GOSICK III —ゴシック・青い薔薇の下で—

GOSICK IV —ゴシック・愚者を代弁せよ—

GOSICK V —ゴシック・ベルゼブブの頭蓋—

GOSICK VI —ゴシック・仮面舞踏会の夜—

GOSICK s —ゴシックエス・春來たる死神—

GOSICK s II

—ゴシックエス・夏から遠ざかる列車—

GOSICK s III

—ゴシックエス・秋の花の思い出—

砂糖菓子の弾丸は撃ちぬけない

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撃ちぬけない  
Bullet

弾丸は

砂糖菓子の  
Lolily pop





The town could be seen far below,  
and the dull Sea of Japan spread far.

Mokuzu murmured, "Hmm....."

In the town, slightly tall buildings were crowded together,  
and in the middle of them was the station.

The dilapidated roof of the long and narrow shopping arcade.

Besides them were a long asphalt road, paddy fields,  
and houses here and there.

Old fishing boats were anchored at the shore.

There was a group of old trucks.

It was a small, small world.

It was like an old miniature garden.

I got a strange feeling,

like my chest was being squeezed.



Tomohiko continued, put his hand in his pocket,  
and took out a five hundred yen coin.

"I'll make it disappear with the power of an incantation."

When he chanted some incantation and opened his left hand,  
the coin had disappeared.



桜庭一樹

砂糖菓子の弾丸は撃ちぬけない  
A Lollypop or A Bullet



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**The Sugar Candy Bullet  
Can't Shoot Through**  
A Lollypop or A Bullet

FM38-6  
176

Illustrations: muu  
Cover Design: Kikuchi Hakatoko

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Excerpt from a newspaper article:

Early in the morning of October 4, in Sakaiminato, Tottori, a girl's dismembered corpse was discovered at the side of Mount Nina. The body was identified as Umino Mokuzu-san (13), a second year middle school student who lived in the town. Mokuzu-san had been missing from the night of the previous day. The one who made the discovery was her friend, Ako-san (13), who went to the same middle school, and the police, who are looking for the culprit and the motive of the crime, are asking Ako-san about the reason she was at the site where the corpse was discovered, Mount Nina.....



## Chapter 1

### Can't Get Along with the Sugar Candy Bullet

The day the transfer student, Umino Mokuzu,<sup>1</sup> barged in I mean entered my class was probably around September 3 or 4 or something like that. Summer vacation had ended and the second term had started and it was a cloudy morning of leisurely laziness. We looked at the name that that girl had written with unexpectedly beautiful hand-writing on the blackboard and thought quite normally, "That's an unbelievable name." Because it was unbelievable. It was a name no one would give to someone with the last name Umino, I mean, I wouldn't want that name no matter what last name I had.

The boy called Kanajima,<sup>2</sup> who sat next to me with an aisle between us, quietly murmured, "Yo, I wanna see who her parents are," and looked at me from across the aisle. "Right, Yamada?"<sup>3</sup> When I tried to nod, the girl who sat behind me poked me with the tip of her lead pencil and told me, who turned around, shocking information.

"Nagisa,<sup>4</sup> that girl's dad is Umino Masachika."<sup>5</sup>

".....What, for real?"

"He's from this prefecture, right? The place he used to live in is close."

"Yeah, I know, but....."

I recalled Umino Masachika's delicate, beautiful face, which I used to see a lot on TV. Of course, he was

famous a long time ago, and we didn't know that much about him, but the debut song from when he was in a band was really good, and was sometimes used in commercials even now. In commercials for things like cars, make up, and stockings.

### 'Mermaid's Bones'

Lyrics/Composition: Umino Masachika

In the morning glow, I was looking at the sea.  
I found you.  
A mermaid beautiful like a dream.  
Because in just one moment, you disappeared,  
I come to this sea many times  
To look for you.....

I finally found you and called out to you.  
You turned back.  
A mermaid beautiful like a dream.  
Because you came here,  
I reached my hand out and finally caught you.  
You're in my hands.....

—The number of people who know the third verse of this somehow very beautiful song is, incidentally, few. The man in the song who catches the cute

mermaid, believe it or not, makes her into sashimi and eats her. The mermaid. Into ikezukuri.<sup>6</sup> And in the end, he says something like, 'The bones were a beautiful pale pink.' Scary.

Until the end of the second verse, this song is very romantic. Everyone becomes taken with Umino Masachika. But the third verse.....

The third verse is almost like a dismemberment murder done for pleasure.

The transfer student who seemed to be the daughter of that celebrity, maybe because of her name too, had started drawing the interest of the class. But I stayed cool. I pretended she wasn't there and gazed at the edge of my desk.

That day was just about the third month after, on top of worrying about things like my future and my older brother and various other things, I more or less decided on what I would do after graduating from middle school, and bound the decision to 'not worry about or get involved with trivial things that didn't seem to relate to living' with my soul. Money, money, MONEY. That was why what I thought was something like, 'Ah, so this girl's father is a celebrity. Man, I wish I had a rich parent.'

Incidentally, that transfer student in question, Umino Mokuzu, who had been made to stand at the podium, started shaking her leg up and down like she was troubled while facing down. When the homeroom

teacher said, "Introduce yourself," she twisted around her black hair, most of which was cut short, except for her bangs, which were long and hiding her face, with the finger of her right hand. The thing that was being gripped in her other hand

—Spla-sh

made a watery sound. I made a dubious expression. I raised my head and looked at it.

It was mineral water. And it was in a two liter bottle. That which seemed heavy was already half empty, and after Umino Mokuzu, who didn't stop shaking her leg, suddenly raised the bottle up, she took the cap off, lifted up her pale jaw, and

Glug, glug, glug, glug glug glug glug!  
drank furiously.

The bottle became mostly empty at once. I noticed that she wasn't shaking her leg, but was trembling. The boy next to me, Kanajima, murmured, "She's weird." Umino Mokuzu finished drinking and lowered the bottle.

Her pale, pretty face appeared.

Her skin was, like someone dripped in and mixed a small amount of blue in white watercolor and used that to paint her, a strange color. But she was undoubtedly a pretty girl. From her thin, colorless lips, drip drip drip drip.....water fell. Those lips slowly, like something from a nightmare, started squirming.

"U, u, u.....uuu."



Everyone.....all of the people in the class including the teacher, drank the saliva in their mouths and looked at her.

“Uuu, uu, uuuuuu!”

Drip.....water fell again. It might be drool.

“Uuumino Mokuzu desu,”<sup>7</sup>

Mokuzu wrung out. Everyone, simultaneously, felt relieved.

“Here, question!”

It felt like the girl who sat behind me raised her hand. It was the luck-pusher, Eiko. I was sure that she was trying to help out this strange transfer student. She was softhearted, brimming with curiosity, and was a happy person who hadn't been through tough times.

“Umino-san, is your father Umino Masachika?”

Then Umino Mokuzu suddenly, for some reason, made a very pained expression as if she had had something terrible said to her. Then she took a breath, and said,

“.....So-”<sup>8</sup>

The classroom started being filled with “Eh, he is!?” “For real?” and the like. Mokuzu grimaced, and while drool or mineral water or some transparent liquid I didn't know about dripped and dripped, said,

“Sonna koto, arimasen.”<sup>9</sup>

and glared right at Eiko. It felt like Eiko got miffed. From behind me, she was murmuring things like “Ehh? Why are you lying?” Eiko raised her hand

again with a “Here!” and tried to say something.

At that time, the transfer student, Umino Mokuzu, while something was dripping from her, spoke.

“I,”<sup>10</sup>

“.....I?”

Not only Eiko, but everyone asked that in low voices. And then they stared at the transfer student's body. The bosom of her uniform was raised cutely. From her skirt, which was shorter than normal, came pale, slender legs. She was a girl.

“I, you see,”

Mokuzu spoke with a firm tone.

“I, you see, am a mermaid.”

The classroom became more quiet. Everyone leaned in as if to ask, “Whaat!?” I kept pretending she wasn't there. I fiddled with my lead pencil and thought. What's with this girl? I didn't how she misunderstood everyone's silence, but Umino Mokuzu smiled. It was a satisfied smile like she was happy that everyone understood. Then she continued.

“Umm, you see, mermaids don't have genders. Everyone's kind of what humans call female, but unlike humans, they don't have reproductive organs, and they lay a lot of eggs. That's why I don't have a father. All of the mermaids in the Sea of Japan are my allies. And the reason I came here was that I wanted to learn about humans. I came because I heard rumors in the waves that humans are foolish, are luck-pushers,

have short life spans, and are really stupid creatures. Everyone, please.”

To us, who were looking at Mokuzu in blank amazement, Mokuzu said more.

“Please teach me how foolish humans are, how little their lives are worth living, and how all of them should die. I look forward to learning from you. Bow.”

With a weird sound effect, Mokuzu lowered her head.

Next to me, Kanajima tsked with his tongue.

While the class was shocked, I thought, 'Whaat?'

It seemed that thinking about things that weren't directly related to living—like the meaning of life, what love was, how the world worked—was, in medieval times, the privilege of the aristocracy. I heard that from my brother the other day. That was why I thought that the transfer student who talked about stuff like how everyone was, how humans were, was still at ease. She was interested in her surroundings, she seemed to want people to care about her, and seemed to be unreasonable like a child.

The homeroom teacher, who was listening to Mokuzu's address with a dazed expression, pulled himself together and said,

“Umino, you're, umm, an individualist. Well, get along, everyone. Your seat is, umm.....the one all the way back, it's empty, right? Use that desk. Well, first period's going to start, so I'll be going.”

After saying all of that, he went out in a hurry. While making splashing noises with her huge water bottle, Umino Mokuzu slowly started walking down the aisle. For some reason, she slid her leg on the ground in a weird way. Walking like that, she passed by the side of my seat.

Pale skin and huge eyes, long eyelashes. Suddenly, I remembered that the one Umino Masachika married was an actress who was very popular at the time. She had huge eyes and a voluptuous body. Umino Mokuzu looked like someone took that beautiful and very glamorous actress, tormented her, and made her skinny. Not that that mattered.

Splash, the mineral water came out of the water bottle again.

Kanajima stuck out his long leg.

Umino Mokuzu tripped on it and fell on the ground.

Kanajima pretended nothing happened. Eiko laughed while saying, "Oh noo."

I, who turned around, for just a moment, saw the inside of Umino Mokuzu's uniform's skirt, which flipped up magnificently as she fell. I don't think anyone else saw. It was only for a moment, and because of the angle, only I could see. There was also the morning sun from the window at that time, so I could see the dark inside of her skirt well.

Pale thighs.

Light blue underwear.

Writhing, vivid.....bruises.

—Many painful-looking marks from blows were shining. Bruises the shape of fists, some purple, some a rotten green color, some dark red, had risen on top of her skin.

After that moment, Mokuzu fell flat on the ground, and maybe because it hurt, didn't move for a while. Even Eiko, who had been laughing, seemed like she became worried because she didn't get up, and started saying, "Hey, are you all right?" Glub glub glub.....water spilled on the ground from the water bottle that had fallen. Umino Mokuzu, who slowly got up after a while, turned around and looked directly at me.

—You saw, right?

That was the look in her eyes. Behind the bangs which went on her small face, she stared at me with her dark, ridiculously large eyes.

And then she opened her colorless, ghost-like lips and murmured in a low voice.

"Go die."

I grimaced. I looked away while shaking with anger.

Why did she say that to me, who was the most indifferent toward her?

But I decided not to think about it anymore. I didn't see anything. While thinking that, I pretended nothing happened. I wasn't going to get involved with extraneous things that wouldn't become 'live rounds.'<sup>11</sup> I was going to go my whole life without looking at things like that. Until the day I would die.

∴

That—  
happened in September.  
And now, it's early in the morning of October 4—.

I'm walking.  
Silently.  
With a certain feeling in my chest.

When the season of red leaves has almost come to the foot of the mountain, many people come to see the leaves that have turned slightly red. And when it becomes winter, snow piles up, and people come to ski. But in this halfway season, there are no people who walk up the mountain.

It's this early in the morning. No one else is here.

I'm walking silently.

Because it feels like the object I have to find is there.....

That of course isn't a live round, but in spite of that, I was walking.

That was, yes.....

To borrow my brother's words, an aristocrat's candy: Sugar candy that didn't fill you up.

∴

My name is Yamada Nagisa.

I'm thirteen years old. I'm in the second year of middle school.

I'm medium build, and my hair is long. It's hard for me to list any features I have in particular. Eiko, who sits behind me, says I'm "cold." Kanajima, who's next to me, says, "I can't believe you like raising things. Do you like small animals? Do you like looking after things? You don't look the type." My brother says,

"Recently, you're desperate about loading bullets. Are you a believer of live rounds, my sister?"

The town I live in is really small. It's really dilapidated. I'll try giving a little tour.

In the middle of the town is the marketplace. For fish. The smell of the seashore hangs in the air, and although it's probably full of people early in the morning, when we pass it to go to school, no one's there anymore, and only the water that drips from hoses wet the walkway. It becomes deserted. Near it is a small streetcar station. The kids who come from the mountains go to school go on them, and they're always full in the morning. On the outer wall of the streetcars are drawn manga-styled sardines for some reason. It seems they're advertisements that says we should all eat the sardines that are caught at the harbor. Streetcars with cute red, yellow, and green sardines painted on them stop while making noises, and students bustle out.

The prefectural meeting hall is far away. Starting by getting on a bus at the station, it's far in the

direction of the mountains. Sometimes people like singers and idols on nation-wide tours come, but even though they're nation-wide, this small town is passed by often. Once a year, the wind bands of the town's middle schools come together and have a Christmas concert, and I went once after being invited. There were cracks along the walls, and when I stared up at it, a piece of it cracked off and fell. It's surprisingly shabby.

Night. Even the always cloudy Sea of Japan is pretty on summer nights. Between the horizon that becomes a hazy purple and the pale, damp coast, the fishing boats that catch squids float while shining like will-o'-the-wisps. The round, orange lights look pretty nice. They make me feel like I'm looking at something not of this world.

On the other side, in the direction of the mountains, there's the nuclear power plant that was made around when I was born. Actually, all the things city people think should be made in the country is in this town. A nuclear power plant. A prison. A reform school. A mental hospital. And also an SDF garrison. That's why we don't go near the mountain that much. Middle and high school students go on dates in the shopping arcade and department store in the town, or at the coast.

Ah, speaking of the town, when I walk through places like the shopping arcade, I pass by people who are wearing wearing military uniforms for real and

not for fashion. The only movie theater, which is dilapidated, always shows double features, and is trying to show the latest movie starring Tom Cruise and the latest 'Tsuribaka' movie. It's all mixed up. On the price list is

'Adults	1800
Students	1200
Children	800
SDF	1400'

"I see, it's a discount for the SDF!" I think each time I see it. If someone becomes a person who does things like participate in multinational armies, they can watch movies for less, huh?

My house is one floor of a run-down public-housing facility that was in the town, near the marketplace and the station. The room in the depths of the dim 1LDK is occupied by my brother—my brother's body and his vast collection of books, games, and some kind of dolls—and my mother and I have put a small desk in the slightly spacious kitchen, and take out futons at night.

If someone asked me what I wanted most right now, I think I'd say my own room without hesitation. A place where I could be alone.

For that, I needed live rounds.

In the summer when I was thirteen, that was all I thought about.

The transfer student, Umino Mokuzu, on the morning of the day she transferred, knocked out her classmates with a strong impact. Eiko's group timidly went near her, surrounded her desk, and gazed at her with curiosity.

Beside me, Kanajima sometimes turned around and looked at Mokuzu. And then he tsked again. The other boys were somewhat restless too. I thought they were all weird, and then, I noticed that they were acting that way because Mokuzu, who was an extreme oddball when all was said and done, had a cute face like an idol on the other side of the TV.

She, who seemed to have come from the city, was way more refined than us. She was pale, her skin looked almost transparent, she was skinny, and—

“They were all brand goods!”

whispered Eiko, who returned to her seat in a hurry since first period was about to start, and made me turn around by poking me.

“Brand?”

“Like what she takes notes with. And her bag. And her hand towel. They were all really famous brands. That towel costs like five thousand yen, you know?”

“A towel?”

“It does.”

.....However, the number of girls who gathered around Umino Mokuzu decreased as the ten minute breaks in the morning went by, by lunch, there were one, two people, and after school, there were finally

no more people. Umino Mokuzu herself didn't seem to mind, and with a water bottle in one hand, continued to guzzle water.

“.....I don't get her,”

complained Eiko. The only one who pretended she didn't exist from the start among the girls was me. Seeming to have taken it upon herself to pick me to listen to her, Eiko came to the front of my desk and said,

“It isn't only that she's weird: she's aggressive. Would you say something like that to someone you just met?”

“What did she say to you?”

“Well, various things.....”

Hmm, I murmured, and stood up. I didn't care.

After school, I, Yamada Nagisa, who liked raising things since I was a first year in middle school, went straight to a corner of the schoolyard where the rabbit hutch was, crossed the wire netting, cleaned up, changed the water, and replenished the carrots and cabbages. I took care of these animals in this pen, which would die if I didn't take care of them, with attention I would never give to a human and probably, something like love. But, that didn't mean that I petted their heads or talked to them. They wouldn't have understood even if I did things like that. They were animals.

When I went out of the rabbit hutch and started

walking toward the gate of the school, soon after, something hit the back of my head with a thud, fell on the ground, and bounced. When I put my hand to my head and turned back, what had fallen was a bottle of mineral water, and the one who threw it, making an exaggerated swinging pose like she had just finished throwing it and was grinning, was that transfer student.

“.....What? That hurt.”

“Why aren't you?”

“Wha?”

Umino Mokuzu slowly came near me. She was dragging her left leg on the ground. It was as if it hurt.

The mermaid princess.....

If I wasn't mistaken, her leg hurt like it was stabbed by a knife with each step she took in the story.

“Oww, oww.....!”

Mokuzu, who came next to me, while crumpling her pretty face and looking ugly like she was another person, rubbed her leg. I remembered the marks of blows I saw in the morning when Mokuzu fell over.

“Does your leg hurt?”

“I said it does!”

“That's why I asked.”

This isn't going anywhere~..... Give me a break.

While dragging her leg and slightly shaking places like her shoulders and her arms like someone who was seriously sick, Mokuzu started walking past my side. Not having a choice, I decided to walk. Unlike

me, who always went home by myself in a hurry, it was a slow speed. It kind of irritated me.

“Why aren't you?”

Mokuzu asked again.

“Why aren't I what?”

“Why aren't you?”

“What!?”

“Interested in me?”

I stopped walking.

Having walked for a while after leaving school, on the unpaved road in the middle of fields and paddy fields where organic fertilizer from cow dung that was mixed with straw and made to fertilize had fallen here and there, making a sour smell, we looked at each other.

“.....Could it be that you want me to be interested in you?”

“Not really.”

“It's true that you're a really weird transfer student. But.....”

I laughed scornfully. This is stupid, I thought.

“But, you're not a live round.”

“A live round?”

“What I need is that. I decided not think of other things. From three months ago.”

Behind Mokuzu, far away, there was a slightly elevated mountain. Mount Nina. With a small shrine at its base and a bit of a hiking course, it was the local mountain. Beyond it was, although it couldn't be seen

from here, the GSDF's garrison, and depending on the direction of the wind, a weird, booming sound could be heard.

In these hard times, local youths, especially those with familial circumstances, join the SDF. You could get money, you didn't have to pay for living expenses, you could get in even if you had a bad academic background, and unlike other jobs, they treated you like you were grown up, so you could become an adult quickly.

That was a live round. Real power you could shoot into life.

In summer, that was all I thought about. But even if I told this other-worldly transfer student who was said to have a brand name towel that cost five thousand yen in her bag, I thought it'd just turn out like, "If you don't have any bread, why don't you just eat a cake?" I closed my mouth and started walking again.

Beside me, Mokuzu kept following me.

She was dragging her leg on the ground painfully. It was an annoying sound.

"What is that? A shoe sore?"

"A witch got me."

"Huh?"

"When I got out of the sea, she made my legs incomplete so that they hurt when I walk. It's harassment. And she said if my wish doesn't come true, I'll become umi no mokuzu. I'm going to become bubbles and disappear."

“Are you stupid?”

When I said that coldly and started walking faster, Mokuzu became serious and followed me while dragging her leg.

“That's why I have to have my wish granted. What's your name?”

“Yamada Nagisa. What's your wish?”

“It's a secret.”

“Is it what you said in the morning? That humans are foolish.....”

“That was a lie.”

Mokuzu smiled.

“I thought people would think it was funny, but no one did.”

“Of course they didn't.”

“I'll tell you the secret.”

Mokuzu opened her huge, dark eyes.

“The truth is that I came to find a real friend. An important friend. A good friend who'll work really hard for me. If I don't find one, I'll become umi no mokuzu.”

“Hmm..... Ohh..... It'd be great if you can find one.”

“Yamada Nagisa, it'd be great if it was you.”

“Why?”

“You're the cutest in the class, aren't you? Though you're sulky. ....Well, of course, I came, so you'll be second place from tomorrow.”

With a serious face, Mokuzu said,

“Be my friend.”

“.....This morning, didn't you tell me to 'Go die'? I don't think I could become good friends with someone who says things like that. I don't want to.”

“That's an expression of love.”

“You must be stupid.....”

I became a little surprised at her response and said that coldly. Mokuzu was still grinning. I decided to admonish her a little seriously.

“You're wrong. That's hatred.”

The strange transfer student who couldn't tell the difference between expressions of love and hatred, Umino Mokuzu, widened her eyes like she was surprised. And then, suddenly, she looked down like she was very hurt.

After that, she stayed quiet, so I started becoming kind of scared. Mokuzu opened the water bottle she was holding in one of her hands and guzzled water again. It was creepy.

A paddy field full of ears of rice spread out wide behind Mokuzu, and beyond that, I could see the coastline of the Sea of Japan. There weren't any big buildings or highways, so I could see the sea even though I was this far away. It was a hazy light blue, and today, maybe because the waves were high, there was pale spray here and there.

Vivid greenery and the hazy color of the sea. Evening was approaching and was changing the color of the paddy fields and the sea.

“.....Um, I have to go.”

Mokuzu, who finished drinking her water, took the empty water bottle and threw it at a field. She looked into my eyes as I was startled, and said,

“I have to find one before the storm comes.”

“.....The storm?”

It was a hot and humid evening. I could hear the sound of insects. Beyond the unpaved road, the air shimmered. From the mountain, a lukewarm, earthy smell like warmed hay hung in the air. It was the fragrance brought about by soil, leaves, and dampness.

I wiped the sweat that was rose to my forehead.

Mokuzu spoke.

“Humans haven't realized it.”

“Huh.”

“In this port city, once every ten years, there's a big storm that doesn't come up in the weather forecast.”

My chest, as I was unprepared, hurt like it was crushed by a big hand. I gulped and glared at the side of Umino Mokuzu's face. Mokuzu was staring at the green leaves that swayed in the field.

“Before that storm comes, I have to find one.”

“.....”

“Mermaids are asexual, you see. But they're feminine creatures. Everyone's born in this sea and scatter to all the seas in the world, but when it becomes the breeding season once every ten years, they come back even if they have to risk their lives. At that time, a big storm that doesn't come up in the

weather forecast comes. The mermaids' breeding season. A big storm came ten years ago too, though I don't think you remember."

".....I remember."

As if Mokuzu couldn't hear what I said with a low voice, she continued talking.

"A big storm will come this year too. The date is October 3. One more month, right? If I don't find what I'm looking for by that time, I'll return to the sea. Because I'm the only princess. I have to go back."

"I remember the storm. I can't forget it,"

I said in a low voice.

After that, Mokuzu and I didn't say anything. Before long, the road in the fields ended and split to the left and right. I went toward the public housing facility in the town. Mokuzu went toward the mansion area where extravagant houses stood.

While thinking that I'd never talk to that transfer student again, I continued to walk with a quick pace.

When I came home, I heard my brother Tomohiko's voice from the end of the dim 1LDK. It was an uninflected voice like he was reading something, like he was chanting verses from a Buddhist sutra.

My mom wasn't home. She would be at the cash register of a supermarket until it became late. Our living was supported with the money my mother made and a little livelihood protection. No, it wasn't supported. We couldn't buy anything. There weren't



any places that would hire a middle school student in this town, so I wasn't working.

When I opened the fusuma reservedly, my brother slowly raised his head.

He elegantly brushed up his long, slightly brown hair. His feminine, beautiful face that looked a little like a foreigner's appeared. My brother was a surprisingly beautiful guy. He was tall, skinny, and had dreamy-looking eyes. He was amazingly smart, but he was amazingly unable to do anything.

My brother opened a magic dictionary or some book that didn't make any sense, and chanted something seriously.

“What're you doing?”

“Magic.”

“That's what it looked like.”

I went to the kitchen and started making dinner for three people. Food cooked by boiling and miso soup. Also salad. I washed the rice. My brother was chanting something in an elegant tone and of course didn't even get up. The only times my brother got up was to go to use the toilet or to take a bath once a week. And also when the weird goods that he ordered online came to the entranceway.

Tomohiko was good-looking, had wonderful manners, and was really smart and got great grades, so when my dad passed away, my mom counted on my brother. He was the son she was proud of. She thought he would be the the magic staff that would let

us get out this life. Until the second year of middle school. But right now, my brother is, as a lady in the neighborhood said, “Tomohiko-kun is one of the ones that are around right now, isn't he? That, right? That. What was it again? Hi, hi.....hii.....” It's hikikomori! I thought, but I didn't help her out. Right now, that's what my brother is. But I don't call him that. Even in my mind.

I think my brother is a modern aristocrat.

Not going to work, not doing things that have to do with living, just spending his time reading, thinking, and talking about the things he's interested in. My brother actually stopped going to middle school and didn't apply for high school, and now that three years have passed since he stopped going outside the house, he was more beautiful than before and had a dream-like appearance. My mother and I feel like we're keeping an existence that isn't my brother—a beautiful creature—in secret. My brother, who seems to live on mist, from the point of view of me, who's in reality, costs a lot of money.

To keep buying the nonsensical things he has mail ordered, the livelihood protection money, the money my mother makes at her part-time job, and my dad's insurance money disappear like a dream.

I don't know whether my brother knows or not, but he doesn't say anything. He keeps ordering various things. And he's always in his room.

—When I finished making dinner, I put aside my

mother's share and put my brother's food neatly on a tray. I used expensive dishes and lacquered chopsticks. I neatly arranged the cooked food and the salad so that they would look pretty, added rice and miso soup, entered my brother's room, and after watching my brother, who had his eyes closed as he listened to music with his headphones with rapt attention, in fascination for a short while, gently put the tray on his desk. At the low dining table in the kitchen, I put my dinner down casually, turned on the TV, and started eating.

“.....Nagisa.”

I heard a clear voice that sounded like a bell ringing. When I raised my head, while using the lacquered chopsticks so elegantly I couldn't believe he was eating the same food as me, my brother looked at me and smiled.

“Nagisa.”

“What?”

I leaned my body forward.

“When you graduate from middle school.....”

Tomohiko smiled more.

“When you graduate, are you going to become a soldier?”

“Yeah, I will.”

I nodded.

I suddenly felt like crying.

I nodded one more time.

“I'll say that at the course consultation too. That I

won't go to high school. And I'll join the SDF."

"Are there girls too?"

"Recently, there are. When I asked the SDF, they said there are five right now. They're all from this area. They aren't received differently from guys, it doesn't matter if you're a middle school graduate, and they said you get paid right away."

".....Paid?"

Tomohiko grimaced a little like he heard a dirty word. And then he said, "Hm....." and nodded.

"It's that thing you like, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Live rounds."

"Right....."

I swallowed the food with a gulp and said,

"I'll take care of you for your whole life, Oniichan."

"My, my."

Tomohiko smiled elegantly.

—Neither my mother, Tomohiko's friends, nor I really know why my brother suddenly stopped going to school. But the one thing that's related to it is that something happened between Tomohiko, who was very popular with girls at the time, and a girl who was his classmate and forced herself into his room. She was a fairly proactive girl, seemed like she was talkative, and was taken with Tomohiko. Something happened. The girl didn't come anymore, and Tomohiko didn't go anywhere anymore.

When I met that girl on the road, she grinned at me,

who was in the upper grades of elementary school. Oh my, she said. Then she said to the girl with her, "It's Yamada-kun's sister," and they laughed and left.

Something happens and the start is something trivial, but they can't do anything about it, and with that, people change.

They lose their balance, and in a bad way, and they become "their true self."

What happened to Tomohiko, whether he will or won't change with time, what should be done, I don't know. No matter how smart he was, I was sure that Tomohiko didn't know anything about himself.

While I was eating dinner, like he did for the past three years, Tomohiko asked me what I did in school. The thin, thin string that connected Tomohiko to the outside world and seemed like it would break at any moment were these reports of mine. Tomohiko seemed to enjoy living my school life through my words and processed them like they were important many times in his mind. But today, all I talked about was the strange transfer student, Umino Mokuzu.

"Umino Masachika.....?"

Tomohiko tilted his head.

"Ahh, him, huh? That singer....."

"Right."

I nodded.

Umino Masachika was the number one celebrity of this shabby port town that went along the Sea of Japan, and the reason for that was that when he was in

high school, the band he formed went to Tokyo, made a major debut, became a great hit, and even after the boom, only he, who had done the vocals, kept appearing on TV as an actor and nowadays, he was playing the role of a yakuza on V-Cinema, and there was a time when he was talking about something like universal peace or something which was called Umino's world and went well at the time, but a few years ago, he was arrested because of something involving marijuana, and he wasn't seen after that, and.....

It was a name that used to be very famous that everyone had forgotten for a while. That was Umino Masachika.

"Hmm....."

Tomohiko nodded. Then he smiled very elegantly, faced me, who was angry with Mokuzu, and said,

"That girl's cute, isn't she?"

"Huh? What part of her?"

"She's that, isn't she? A 'Sugar Candy Bullet.'"

"Wha?"

"What you want to shoot are live rounds, right? A direct power that commits to the world: a power with substance. But what that girl keeps shooting without stopping are imaginary bullets."

Tomohiko brushed up his long hair and smiled pleasantly.

"Long, long ago, there was a man who killed people with bullets made from rock salt. The man made bullets by making rock salt very, very hard, and killed his victims near fireplaces. At those warm places, the bodies would become very warm, and the rock salt that remained in their bodies would melt. Without leaving a trace, you see."

"Ohh.....?"

I leaned my body forward.

"But, then, was that guy not caught? But if he wasn't, you wouldn't know that story, would you? Was he caught? When did it happen? How?"

Tomohiko shrugged his shoulders.

"A great detective came and saw through it splendidly."

".....So that's what happened."

I was disappointed. I looked at the mountain of retro mystery novels that had a live round rate of zero which were stacked up in Tomohiko's room, and said,

"So it didn't really happen."

"You're too disappointed, Nagisa. You have to enjoy lies more."

"Yeah. But, Umino Mokuzu's lies kind of irritate me."

"That girl is shooting sugar candy ceaselessly. They're bullets that melt inside your body and, from your point of view, really worthless bullets. Nagisa....."

Tomohiko put down his chopsticks elegantly.

"It was delicious. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

I sighed at Tomohiko's carefree voice and stood up. Then I murmured.

"Are they like gumdrops?"

"That's right, Nagisa."

Tomohiko looked at my ^ shaped mouth and chuckled. And then after he suddenly looked serious, he put on his headphones and started concentrating on a DVD. He suddenly shut me out. I was already used to it, so even while being tired, I took the trays and returned to the kitchen.

Right now, I'm walking.

It's the morning of October 4.

I'm going up something like an animal trail that is away from the hiking course of Mount Nina.

The road is covered with moss, hard rocks come tumbling down, there are a lot of spider webs, and it's a terrible place. My legs hurt. I slip on the moss and almost fall many times. I keep walking. With a certain conviction in my chest.

I'm very uneasy.

The morning mist is a hazy white and covers my field of vision, and after a while, is pushed by the cold wind and blows past.

While I continue to walk.....

I remember.

—I can't believe that only one month has passed since then.

Time that can't be taken back.

The month that passed since then.

That girl kept shooting sugar candy bullets.

∴

The next day and the day after that, the transfer student, Umino Mokuzu's eccentricities stood out more and more. When I thought she was looking up at the nude statue in the front yard that I don't really get and was doing something, she was talking to it, and it wasn't that she was just talking to it, but it seemed that somehow a conversation was taking place. She

sometimes walked through passages while singing weird songs. When I thought the fire alarm suddenly went off, Mokuzu was running away with a face that said, 'Darn it.'

The melancholy of aristocrats and what amused them was incomprehensible to me. Every day, the number of girls who talked to Mokuzu decreased and finally became zero, and instead, various pieces of information about the Umino family flew around the girls' rumor network.

When the circle of girls disappeared, although it was reservedly, boys started to approaching her. For example, saying something when passing a handout to her, telling her the location of the broom when it was their turn to clean—I saw several scenes of approach that could be thought of as casual but taking all of one's might. Mokuzu either didn't respond, returned an response that was off, or even when she gave a proper response, she would open a weird door that wasn't the one she was told and look surprised.....anyway, she was weird.

Next to me, Kanajima, at lunch, called out to me reservedly.

“Hey Yamada...”

“.....What? Want to look at my notes?”

“Yeah.”

Kanajima took my notes and while copying the parts he needed, said,

“.....That's not it. I mean, I wanted to see your notes too, but Yamada, you're close to her, right?”

I thought he was talking about Eiko and said, “Yeah, I guess. Why?” When I raised my head because there

wasn't a response, Kanajima was silent like he was miffed.

“.....Hm? What?”

“Would you and Umino, no, you invite Umino and, umm.....so in other words, if it was the three of us, would you want to go watch a movie or some... thing.....?”

“Huh? You, Umino, me, and Eiko?”

“Eiko?”

Kanajima and I looked at each other for a short while.

I finally noticed my mistake, and said,

“Ah, you weren't talking about Eiko, but Umino Mokuzu? Ehh~..... We aren't close. We don't talk, do we?”

“The day before yesterday, on the day she transferred here, you walked back together with her, didn't you?”

“That time, she threw a water bottle at me from behind.”

I sighed.

I looked at Kanajima's sulky expression, became sulky myself, and said,

“.....We aren't close. You should ask people from the social world like Eiko for things like that.”

“The social world?”

Kanajima started laughing.

“Hahaha, Yamada, you're funny sometimes.”

“Hey.”

“Hahaha.”

After he stopped laughing, Kanajima became quiet. And then after that, he didn't talk to me about Mokuzu.

Class started and while I was taking back my notes, although it was late, I noticed that Kanajima had gathered a considerable amount of courage to ask me that casually. My chest hurt a little. Then, I slowly took a glance at the side of Kanajima's face. ....Whoa, he was sleeping. That was anticlimactic.

After that, I slowly turned back and looked at Umino Mokuzu, who was sitting in the very last row. Mokuzu was immersed in a mysterious performance that involved putting a lead pencil on her upper lip, sticking out her lips, and not letting it fall even when she took her hand away. Her face looked really weird. When her eyes met mine, while keeping that face, she skillfully winked at me. I didn't know what was going on any more, so I sighed.

Three days after the transfer, after school.

After I went out of my classroom, I cut straight through the schoolyard and headed to the rabbit hutch. I heard the light sound of footsteps as someone came running after me. It was a unique footstep that sounded like someone was dragging one leg, so I quickly judged who it was and nimbly avoided it to the right.

Right by my left side passed a bottle of mineral water with a whistling sound. And then it fell while raising dust.

When I turned back, Umino Mokuzu was making a swinging pose again and had a disappointed look on her face.

“.....What do you want?”

“A boy with a buzz cut with said the three of us should go to the movies.”

“Ohh?”

I blinked with surprise. A boy with a buzz cut meant someone in the baseball team. There were a few in the class, but probably, it was Kanajima. I murmured, “Ohh?” again and was impressed that Kanajima asked her himself.

“Why don't you two go? Kanajima wants to go on a date with you.”

I didn't know if it was because of obstinance or abandonment, but I tried to poke fun by saying it in a weird way on purpose. Mokuzu caught up to me while dragging her leg and said,

“He said the three of us.”

“It's hard to ask if it'll just be the two of you.”

“Ah, I see. Because you and I are close.”

I grimaced. Mokuzu was nodding like she understood.

Around us, who were cutting through the schoolyard, the clinking noise and the sound of someone saying, 'Keep it up,' from the baseball team, the sight of the soccer team running around a lot, the sound of basketball team dribbling that came from far in the gym, the performance of the brass band that could be heard from the edge of the school building.....various noises were mixed up. When I felt a gaze and raised my head, one of the members of the baseball team was looking this way and putting his hands together to say, 'Help me out.' Was it Kanajima? When they were wearing their hats and uniforms, I couldn't tell between them.

“All right.”

“Yaay.”

“What movie are we going to watch?”

“Who knows? The buzz cut person said he'd get tickets for three people.”

“Ohh.”

Kanajima was going to use a lot of his allowance that day, I thought dazedly. After starting to walk again, I asked Mokuzu, who was still following me.

“You're a mermaid, right?”

“Yeah.”

Mokuzu nodded like it was obvious.

“Did you ever see a movie before?”

“No.”

Mokuzu answered simply.

Then, talking quickly, she said,

“After all, we're in seas all the time. Seas. We spread to all the seas in the world. I<sup>12</sup> was in a sea in China for a while. It was fun. Though I don't know Chinese. I went to Africa too. It was hot. But we come back before the storm. Because all mermaids have to come back before the storm that comes once every ten years and lay one or two eggs. I'm the 'princess' which there's only one of at a time. When the eggs are laid, there's one red one mixed in with them, and that's the princess. The princess has to incubate all of the eggs, so it's a lot of work. If I don't do it properly, they'll all be no good. That's why I shouldn't really have come to the human world. Haha.”

“.....You started again.”

“No, but, you listen.”

“I don't listen. Now, then.”

Even while being bothered by Mokuzu, I finally arrived in front of the rabbit hutch. Mokuzu stuck to the outside of the wire netting and looked down curiously at me after I went in the rabbit hutch and started cleaning, but when there was a rustling sound and a few white rabbits came out,

“Hiii-!”

she screamed weirdly.

I raised my head and looked at her. Mokuzu became pale to her lips and was shaking. Glug glug glug glug..... She furiously drank mineral water, panted heavily, and then said,

“What is that!?”

“What do you mean? They're rabbits.”

“What're you doing to them?”

“I like raising things. I clean after them and give them food.”

“.....”

Mokuzu became very quiet, so I wondered what happened and looked at face while working. Then, Mokuzu was clinging to the wire netting like a child and glaring at the rabbits.

“What?”

“Do you know? Mermaids' natural enemy.”

“.....How could I?”

“Rabbits.”

“Why?”

Mokuzu furiously drank water again.

“There's 'The Hare of Inaba,' right?”



“Yeah. It's a local myth. A rabbit tries to cross the sea by tricking sharks, its lie is exposed, and it has its skin taken off, right? And then the Okuninushi of something passes by and gives it medicine. ....What about it?”

“The sharks that comes up in that story are mermaids. They're our ancestors. They had a very bad experience by being tricked by that rabbit. That's why rabbits are our natural enemy. Fuu!”

Mokuzu, who was clinging to the wire netting, faced the rabbits and groaned. I became tired, ignored Mokuzu, and took out carrots and cabbages. Mokuzu looked at me, who was carefully taking care of the rabbits, with curiosity.

“What's fun about that?”

“I wonder.”

“Yamada Nagisa likes raising things.”

“That's right.”

“Hmm.....”

Mokuzu murmured unconcernedly.

“.....Are there other things you raise?”

“N-No.....”

When I finally got out of the rabbit hutch, it was just around sunset, and the orange, evening sunlight was falling on the schoolyard. It was bright.

The baseball team, the soccer team, the basketball team, and the brass band were still at it.

I started walking while letting my bag dangle. I passed the school gate and trotted along the country road. Mokuzu followed while dragging her leg on the ground.

The sea that spread out beyond the paddy fields was

being dyed a dark purple little by little starting from the horizon. It was sunset. The evening sun was making the sea look an eerie color.

Thinking, 'I have to go home quickly,' I started walking faster. Eventually, Mokuzu started going farther back while dragging her leg. Then when I turned around at a corner, she wasn't there anymore.

Beyond the horizon, the sea became darkly dyed an even more deep purple, and drew near and went back.

The night of the next day.

My mom, who came back full of energy from work, while saying, "What's for dinner?" took a glance at the fusuma of the room Tomohiko secluded himself in as she always did, sighed a little, took off her shoes, and then suddenly

"In the morning glow~ I was looking at~....."

started singing Umino Masachika's song. I, who was standing at the kitchen to reheat the curry pan, became startled, and said,

"Wh-What?"

"Eh, what do you mean what?"

My mom was in a good mood for some reason. After she put the leftover side dishes that she brought home from her part-time in the refrigerator, and put the curry and leeks I prepared in front of her, she said,

"Did you know that Umino Masachika came from this town?"

"Yeah."

"Recently, it seems he came back. I wonder what he's

doing for work. I heard he was composing and writing lyrics. Also, that he owns a big dog. One with a pedigree. Hmm.....”

She was muttering by herself. When she ate about half of the curry, she raised her head and said,

“It seems he has a daughter. She's pretty like her mother.”

“.....She's in my class.”

“Oh my. What kind of girl is she?”

“A weird girl.”

“Are you close to her?”

She really became interested, and drew her face near. I had spread my notes on the table and was doing my homework, so I found my mom's irritating and said,

“Mh.....”

“Are you?”

“Sunday, gonna watch a movie.”

“You are close to her~!”

I was sure that when she went to her part-time tomorrow, she would boast and say, “My daughter's close to Umino Masachika's.” That was kind of...

My mom, who finished eating, stood up with a “Now then,” and headed to the bathroom. When my mother finally finished taking her bath, I, who had cleaned up and returned to my homework again, kind of wanted to know, and asked.

“What kind of person is Umino Masachika?”

“He's a weird person,”

my mom said with a laugh. Then, she suddenly grimaced.

“Let me see..... He was really a weird person.”

“You knew him?”

“He was my senior in high school. Though I didn't know him personally. What do you call it.....eccentric? Mhh.....”

After my mom found the evening paper and spread it open, she shook her head several times.

“Let me see..... He wasn't someone who was at ease. It might be hard to be around him. With those people, thinking they're interesting while looking at them from a distance is the best.”

“Hmm.....”

Saturday of that week.

I went out to the neighborhood supermarket where my mom worked. I was going to buy food. While thinking things like 'I'll get rice next time because it's heavy,' and 'It'd be great if the tomatoes were cheap,' and 'Making salad with tomatoes in it is easy,' that were related to living, I tried to go through the entrance of the supermarket.

Crash.....!!

Suddenly, there was a really loud noise. When I raised my head, a tall, skinny man had swung his long leg and kicked a shopping cart. The shopping cart vigorously started moving, passed right by my side, hit the wall, made another loud noise, shook violently, and stopped.

An elderly security officer came running and said,

“S-Sir, what are you.....?”

“That cart doesn't move!”

I vacantly looked at the skinny man. What did he mean it didn't move? A moment ago, it was moving like hell after he kicked it..... It was true that the carts at this supermarket were old and didn't move well, but that wasn't supposed to be something to get that angry about.

The man tsked and said,

“Who'd go to this store!?”

“Sir.....?”

My eyes met the man's as I still stood vacantly.

They had brutality,

some insanity,

but were really weak.....

They were unpleasant eyes. My chest suddenly became full of unpleasant feelings and I thought that I hated this man and that I was afraid of him. And then suddenly, I noticed that it was a face I saw somewhere before.

.....Ah.

I mean, it was Umino Masachika. I saw his face on TV a lot.

It was way more wild and thin than the face of the celebrity, Umino Masachika in my memory, and his eyes had much more of a glare than before.

Umino Masachika seemed to have decided not to get involved with the middle school girl he didn't know, just tsked, and slowly passed by my side as I was frozen.

From behind him—

one girl—

walked while facing down embarrassedly.

The hem of her black dress spread lightly. The lace on

the bosom looked adult-like. Her long, pale legs, her small knee caps, showed. It was probably a really expensive brand dress. The mules she had on were delicately designed and seemed like ones an adult would wear. It was a lovely outfit.

Maybe because she sensed my gaze, the girl raised her face.

Through Umino Mokuzu's pale face passed surprise, and then something like despair.

I understood that I had seen the Mokuzu of reality, and felt very apologetic to Mokuzu for some reason. After Mokuzu looked away from me, she trotted by my side. I smelled a perfume-like, refreshing, sweet fragrance. Mokuzu ran toward the shiny foreign car her father got in violently, but her father closed the door and yelled something in a loud voice.

His voice was carried by the wind and reached where I was.

“You walk. I'm going!”

Vroom, vrooom—!

Making a loud exhaust sound, Umino Masachika's flashy foreign car left his daughter behind and went away.

As Mokuzu stood still, her dress swayed unreliably in the wind.

I was watching that for a while, but I turned back, pretended I didn't see, and tried to go into the supermarket. Then I heard someone sobbing from behind. I grimaced, and thinking, “Ah, geez,” turned back again.



Umino Mokuzu was standing still in the middle of the parking lot, crying loudly.

She was like a child. A child who was scolded by her parent and was sobbing unbecomingly.

From the vending machine at the side of the entrance of the supermarket, I paid for a small bottle of mineral water, took it, and headed to the parking lot. And then from behind, I nice swung at Mokuzu's back. The water bottle flew in the air and, splendidly, thudded against Mokuzu's back. Mokuzu, who turned back while rubbing her back like she it hurt, picked up the water bottle that fell on top of the warm asphalt of the parking lot.

Glug, glug, glug, glug glug glug glug glug—!

After chugging all of the 500 milliliters, Mokuzu sniffed with her nose.

Sniff,

sniff,

sniff, sniff!

After that, again.....like on that morning she transferred, when only I saw the inside of Mokuzu's skirt as she fell, with a look that said

—Yooou saaw, riight?

she glared at me. After she opened her her mouth, she said,

“Go die.”

“.....I won't die. You're annoying.”

“Then, be my friend.”

“Tomorrow, we're going to watch a movie, right?”

“.....Wanna ditch Buzz cut and go with me?”

“His name is Kanajima-kun. Remember it for him. No ditching. That would be mean.”

“Man!”

Mokuzu and I stood still in the middle of the parking lot for a while. But it seemed we were in the way of the cars that came in one after the other, so we chose the shadow of the entrance to the supermarket and flumped down on the ground.

“Was that your father?”

“.....”

Mokuzu didn't answer.

“What did you come here to buy?”

“A machete.”

“.....*A machete?*”

I asked in a hysterical voice. Mokuzu nodded.

“I'm in a hurry.”

“Who's gonna use it for what? A machete?”

“My dad's gonna make a dismembered body.”

“.....Huh.”

I scratched my head. I didn't know what to make of it. No, wait. That.....

“He was your father, that person before.”

“.....”

“Umino Masachika.”

“.....Ye-ah.”

Mokuzu, reluctantly, admitted it.

Silence fell. After hesitating for a while, like she was going to talk about something extremely important, Mokuzu drew her colorless lips toward my ear, and murmured in a low voice.

“I really love my dad!”

“Uheh!”

“.....What do you mean uheh?”

“Um, just because.”

“Love is despair, isn't it?”

Mokuzu murmured something that didn't make sense.

A lukewarm wind of the end of summer blew.

From a cash register of the supermarket, through the glass, I felt a gaze. When I turned my head and looked, my mom was looking at us while working at the register. She was communicating by making expressions with her face. Hey, what're you doing in a place like that? Isn't it hot? .....Oh, who's that girl? She's really pretty. Ah, is that Umino Masachika's daughter? Your mom wants to see her more. Ah, geez, there are so many customers I can't go outside, bring her here so I can see, no? What a stingy girl.....

That was more or less how it was. Noticing my gaze, Mokuzu raised her head too. She looked at the funny cash register lady who was making expressions, laughed and laughed, compared my face to hers, and said,

“You look like her!”

“.....”

“Is she your mom?”

“.....Ye-ah.”

“She's a completely normal mom,”

she said enviously. By that statement, I didn't know for sure, but I noticed that it seemed Umino Mokuzu's mom wasn't a normal mom.

“Where's your mom?”

“.....Tokyo.”

“Hmm?”

“She isn't popular anymore. She does stuff like lame ass V-Cinema.”

“Oh.....”

“Also, the other day, in a Tuesday suspense show, she played the second person who was killed.”

That's someone who isn't popular anymore, I thought. With a face that was full of intense hatred that was the complete opposite of when she talked about her weird father, Mokuzu said,

“She's a terrible woman.”

“Why?”

“Because she isn't popular anymore. And she's desperate. She isn't pretty anymore. Because she's old. She's an angry ex-beauty whose face is about to be full of cracks. And she abandoned away her husband.”

“Why'd she abandon him?”

“She said he's crazy.”

“.....Mhh.”

“Mom and I fought, and I won. That's why my dad's together with me. I'm the only one who can be with him.”

The wind blew.

The lukewarm wind made Mokuzu's dress sway. The hem got turned up, and I could see her pale thighs again. On Mokuzu's thighs, several marks from blows—some purple, some green, some a dull pink—were scattered.

When she noticed that I was looking at them again, Mokuzu said, “.....Go die,” again.

I just laughed scornfully and didn't respond.

After I stood up, Mokuzu stood up slowly too.

"If you're looking for a machete, you should go to another store. A store that sells stuff like farming equipment or wood."

"One like Hands?"<sup>13</sup>

"What's Hands?"

"Uhhh, a huge general store."

When I told her a store that sold machetes, even though it was on the way to Mokuzu's house, she kept saying that she didn't know where it was. Not having a choice, I put off buying tomatoes, chicken, and soy sauce, and took Mokuzu and headed toward the store.

I looked around the big store, and after going through stuff like paint, wood, and hoses, finally found the machetes. There were various sizes, but without hesitating, Mokuzu bought the biggest one. It was really expensive, but at the cash register, Mokuzu casually took out a credit card.

On it was written her father's name, "UMINO MASACHIKA," in katakana, and it was gold. It was the first gold card I saw. Ohhh..... Mokuzu, who casually bought something expensive, slung the machete on her back and with her pretty mules that seemed hard to walk in, started walking unsteadily.

We went out and started walking the country road that was dyed in the color of ears of rice.

The sunlight was bright.

Mount Nina looked bigger than it usually did. The sun blazed down on us. There were many ears of rice, and they were bent by the wind sometimes, making just

that part a deeper color. Like the footsteps of a giant who couldn't be seen as he passed by, parts of it changed color.

While wiping the sweat that rose to her pale forehead with one hand, Mokuzu said,

“Where's your dad?”

I hesitated for a moment. And then in a small voice, I said,

“.....He died.”

Mokuzu was tilting her head as if to say, “Oh?” so I continued talking.

“Ten years ago. My elder brother used the insurance money too much and it finally disappeared three months ago. So, I decided to go to work without going to high school.”

“Ten years ago.....?”

asked Mokuzu while walking unsteadily.

“The big storm was also ten years ago.”

“.....So, in that storm.”

“What do you mean?”

“He was on a boat. He was a fisherman, you see. Going to the local fisheries school and becoming a fisherman is pretty common. My father did that too. Even though the weather forecast said it would be sunny, a storm that wasn't on the map came. There were a lot of fishing boats that capsized. That's how he died.”

“What was his name?”

“Yamada Eiji. ....Why?”

“Ahh, I know that person,”

Mokuzu said easily.

I got a bad feeling.

I didn't want my family to become part of Mokuzu's lies—according to Tomohiko, her “Sugar Candy Bullets.” My heart hurt. That pain became anger. But Mokuzu easily broke that forbiddance. With a carefree tone, she said,

“I met that person at the bottom of the sea. He seemed happy. There were gold and silver, and beautiful mermaids. He'd forgotten about the land and was having fun. All fishermen who die at sea are like that. They're happy. Isn't that great?”

I became silent.

Mokuzu always walked on my left side, but at that time, a dump truck started coming on the paved road, which didn't have a walkway. I went to the side. And then to Mokuzu, I said,

“Be quiet.”

“He seemed like he was having fun, and he was doing stuff like dancing and being drunk. Even though he died, it isn't sad. So you should cheer up, and also.....”

“I told you to be quiet.”

“Mermaids are kind, so the bottom of the sea is fun. Besides that,”

Even though Mokuzu should have been able to hear me telling her to stop, she was ignoring me and was talking quickly with all her effort. We finally came to a fork in the road. Not noticing me, who was miffed, Mokuzu smiled and said,

“Thanks for the machete, Yamada Nagisa.”

“.....”

“See you tomorrow.”

After she waved her hand, she walked away unsteadily. I looked at Mokuzu from behind with a bitter feeling.

The cracked, long, straight path that was made out of asphalt continued for as far as I could see, and on both sides, vivid, green ears of rice were swaying. Far away, Mount Nina looked like it was in a haze. There were little pedestrian and car traffic, and it was as if we were the only ones in this world. Mokuzu unsteadily, but for some reason seeming to be happy while her shoulders swayed, walked the country road that didn't match her.

Maybe because of the wind, the smell of the seashore faintly drifted from the sea. I stood still there in a daze and kept watching Mokuzu from behind.

—Of course at that time, I didn't know.

That what I was watching was a poor girl who was walking while carrying the huge machete that would make her into a dismembered body.

And the next day, it was Sunday. When I came to the bus station at the country road on 1:00 PM as planned, only Kanajima had come and was sitting on the bench seeming to have nothing to do. Kanajima and I, talking little, waited for Mokuzu.

Mokuzu didn't come for a while.

When around twenty minutes passed from the scheduled time, Mokuzu, without seeming to be in a hurry, came idly. While guzzling mineral water, she waved her hand at me. It was plain that Kanajima was relieved. Without seeming to be interested in Kanajima, Mokuzu kept looking at me and said, "Yamada Nagisa is

with a grin.

With good timing, the bus that went to the town came. We could have gone by foot or by bicycle, but Kanajima planned for us to go by bus today. For his date course, it seemed that walking a lot or going by bike wasn't included. We went on that run-down bus that came from deep inside the Chugoku mountain range and whose last stop was the front of the station, and each one of us took a ticket.

When the bus started to move, Mount Nina, which had spread out a lot outside of the window, started going away. The sea that spread in front came closer moment by moment instead.

We sat at the widest seat at the back. With Mokuzu in the middle, Kanajima sat on the left side, and I sat on the right side.

Mokuzu took the ticket that had numbers printed on it and held it up, turned it sideways, turned it over, and turned it back again while glaring at it. Kanajima was nervous. Seeing Kanajima being rigid instead of laid back as he usually was next to my seat in the classroom, I started thinking things like, 'Mhh, he might make a better impression if he's the way he always is; he's too tense,' and irresponsibly marking points off from him.

Because Mokuzu was looking at the ticket so much, Kanajima asked, "What?" Then, Mokuzu ignored Kanajima and asked me,

"What is this?"

".....What is it? A ticket."

"A ticket even though it's a bus?"

This isn't going anywhere~.....

According to what Kanajima and I went through a lot of trouble to finally get out of Mokuzu, the buses Mokuzu knew—she said they were the sea roar buses of the Sea of Japan, though, probably, they were buses that ran in Tokyo—charged the same price no matter where she got on and off, and she paid when you got on. Ohh, we said, impressed. It was a culture shock. Kanajima said,

“That's probably because they don't go down mountains.”

“.....Probably.”

This town's buses come from a remote village pretty high up in the mountains of the Chugoku mountain range, and the people who get on first ride for quite a long while, so it would be unfair if they paid the same amount as the people who got on after it came into town. That's why there's a two hundred to one thousand five hundred yen gap in the fare. We got on in the town, so it'll be a little over three hundred yen. And to prove where you got on from, you got a ticket with numbers on it. With the ticket and your coins, you pay when you get off. Well, we're near the movie theater. Let's get off.

When Kanajima and I stood up and headed to the front door, Mokuzu also stood up hurriedly and followed while dragging her leg on the ground. The coins jangled as we paid, and we got off. When the two of us turned back, Mokuzu was facing the driver and showing him something.

It was something like a student ID. The driver gulped

for a moment for some reason, and then nodded. While Mokuzu was paying and going down the steps, the elderly driver looked intently at Mokuzu as she went down the steps while her shoulders swayed. After that, when he noticed us, who were standing without doing anything, he got angry for some reason.

“You're her friends, aren't you!? Help her out!”

Wi.....With what?

Kanajima and I looked at each other in surprise. Neither of us knew what he was talking about. The driver, extremely displeased, said, “Really, kids these days,” closed the door violently, and departed from the bus station.

When Kanajima and I were looking at the bus with our mouths wide-open, only Mokuzu, without seeming to care for some reason,

“Reallyy, kids these daaays.”

was imitating the driver and convulsing with laughter.

The movie theater wasn't crowded. When I thought there were a lot of old people, it was a double feature of a new, guns-blazing, Hollywood action movie, and an old and nostalgic, monochrome, French suspense movie. Right after the action movie started, Mokuzu fell fast asleep. She really went right to sleep. Kanajima paid for the tickets and I could rarely go see movies, so I really watched the movie intently. Mokuzu was sitting on my left, and on Mokuzu's left was Kanajima. Without seeming to care that Mokuzu fell asleep, while eating popcorn, Kanajima watched the explosive scenes with

fascination. When the first one ended and it became the old suspense movie, this time Kanajima, like a wild animal that was shot by a tranquilizer gun, after murmuring, “Kuu.....!” lost consciousness. Mokuzu, who woke up after stirring, looked at the screen and murmured, “Ahh.”

“Hey Yamada Nagisa, this wandering woman is pretty, isn't she?”

“She's Jeanne Moreau.”

“Who?”

“A French actress from before or something. My brother knows about her.”

“Why does she look troubled?”

When I told her what happened until now, Mokuzu became unexpectedly interested and nodded while saying “Hm, hmhm!”

“.....For real!?”

“Shh!”

“She's trapped inside an elevator? How's she gonna to get out?”

“She can't get out.”

“Is she slow?”

“Sh-She isn't slow. Then, how would you get out?”

“Ehh, it's easy.”

While looking at the screen intently, Mokuzu whispered to me in a low voice.

“Because I'm a mermaid.”

“You're still saying that?”

“Mermaids can become bubbles. Right? That's why, bloop bloo~p! I'd just become bubbles and get out. I can

get out of locked rooms. I can play with the police, and I'm free. Aha."

I ignored stupid Mokuzu and continued watching the movie. Mokuzu looked sullen and poked me from time to time.

".....You're annoying."

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course I don't. There isn't one person who can disappear from a locked room."

"Really?"

"My brother said so."

"Well, there's probably no mistake with what your brother said. But, that's about human's, right?"

repeated Mokuzu with confidence.

When we got out of the movie theater, Kanajima, who had been sound asleep, for the first movie said, "Ahh, it was great!" and regarding the second one said, "I slept well!" After that, we drank tea at a cafe and afterward, he started saying that we would walk to the sea, but Mokuzu and I were having a big fight about disappearing and not disappearing from a sealed room, which when I thought about it calmly, was a relatively stupid topic.

"I can!"

"You can't!"

"I can do it!"

Kanajima was scratching his head with a tired look.

"I don't care either way....."

While Mokuzu walked ahead on her own, she swung both of her hands, guzzled water, and continued talking

intensely.

“I can do it. I can become bubbles. Because I.....”

“Then, why don't you prove it?”

“O-.....O...kay.”

For a moment, Mokuzu faltered.

Then she pulled herself together and said,

“Then, next week.....”

“Now. Today. Immediately.”

“Ehh~?”

“You can do it, right?”

I felt like being mean and challenged Mokuzu. Mokuzu was making her mouth into the shape of a ^, but she finally nodded, and after saying,

“.....I can do it!”

took Kanajima and me and started walking.

We slowly walked back the way we came by bus. The three of us were silent. Sometimes, dump trucks passed by us while shaking. Cow dung that had straw mixed in it was flattened by a dump truck and stretched thinly on top of the asphalt. The summer sun was bright. When we drew near the mansion area, a few expensive-looking cars passed by.

—The place we finally came to was a big house in the corner of the mansion area. It was a dreary house that looked like it a square cut out from white rock, and I didn't know if it was modern or what. The windows were all very small and were high up. There was a low hedge in front of the house, and there were vivid flowers that were in full bloom.

“What is this place?”



“My house.”

Kanajima murmured, “What?”

“Then that means, Umino Masachika's? Oh man.”

“From this house, I will disappear.”

“How?”

“By becoming bubbles.”

I sighed tiredly. Because I became miffed and argued, it became something tiresome, I thought. But Mokuzu seemed like she was having fun for some reason. While looking at her watch, she said,

“After I go in, exactly one minute. I will change my form into bubbles. And I will disappear. It will be undeniable proof that I am a mermaid.”

“Huh.....”

After that, Mokuzu grabbed my head and said in a small voice,

“Thirty minutes later, at the first bus stop.”

“.....Wha?”

“I'll meet you there.”

Mokuzu looked at her watch again. Then she faced the entranceway and started walking slowly. Step, step..... She reached the front of the entranceway and opened the big, white door. Although it was evening, it was still hot, and we were standing still while taking the bright light of the sun. It seemed like it just became five, and from far away, I heard the siren of the municipal office going off. The door closed.

Kanajima and I looked at each other.

We both checked the time.

One minute passed.

—It felt like there was a small noise.

We looked at each other.

“.....Hey, how are we supposed to check?”

“Who knows?”

I timidly drew near the Umino house's door and knocked reservedly.

No one came out.

Kanajima seemed to be perplexed and said,

“Is this supposed to be proof that she disappeared? Does she think we're kids? Anyway, saying, 'I'm a mermaid, I'm a mermaid,' all the time...she's crazy. Ah, geez.....”

“You like her.”

“.....I don't know. I might not.”

Kanajima murmured dully.

“Actually, I'm starting to get angry.”

“.....You're saying that now? That's why everyone avoids Mokuzu.”

When I rang the intercom reservedly, no one answered. I rang it a few times, started getting angry, and said,

“Hey, Umino Mokuzu-san! Heey. Come out already!”

When I put my hand on the door, it opened.

Kanajima's stopped in the middle of the entranceway. I also looked.

“Huh.....?”

I murmured unintentionally.

No one's shoes were at the entrance.

Kanajima and I looked at each other.

“That girl.....did she go in with her shoes on?”

“Wh-Who knows?”

The entrance was decorated with flowers, it was so big it made me think someone could live in it, and inside, there was a shiny, spacious hallway. Kanajima and I, while calling out, “Uminoo,” “Hey, Uminoo,” slowly took off our shoes,

“I'm coming in.....”

and went inside.

A spacious kitchen and living room, and a big LCD TV and piano, and.....

A bar counter and bottles of western liquor.

—No one was there.

It seemed that this house didn't have a backdoor, and the only place someone could go in or out it was that spacious entranceway. The windows were all also locked from the inside. I couldn't find a basement or anything either. Kanajima checked the top of the roof, and murmuring,

“She really ain't here,”

with a curious look, stood still.

When I went to the bathroom, there was a weird smell. Like something raw..... It was like the unique rotten smell that hung in the air of the marketplace.

In the bathtub, by itself, was a machete.

It was the huge machete she bought with me yesterday.

Kanajima came too, and when he looked at the machete, he said,

“Wh-What is that?”

“Who knows?”

Kanajima grimaced unpleasantly and went outside. I

tried to do the same, but noticing the dark red thing that was sticking to the machete, stopped.

I gently knelt down and looked at the thing that was sticking to it.

“.....Blood?”

Yeah, it was blood.

I looked up in a daze and started thinking.

No matter how much I thought, I couldn't understand what was going on.

I left that white house which was left open even though no one was in it, and parted with Kanajima, who looked like he didn't understand, while not feeling fine myself.

Then I tried to go home, but I suddenly remembered, and went to the bus stop that was the “meeting place” Mokuzu said. The vibrant ears of rice swayed, and the sea was a dull blue. The worn-out asphalt road continued as far as I could see. The bus stop was slightly tilted.

There—

Mokuzu—

was sitting.

When I went near her idly, Mokuzu raised her head and happily said,

“Hey. ....But, you're late.”

“It's because I was looking for you.”

“Ehehe.”

“.....Hey, how did you do it?”

Mokuzu grinned and said,

“I told you, I became bubbles.”

“.....”

“Ehehe.”

Mokuzu was smiling happily by herself. The wind blew and made her black hair sway. She looked directly at me with her huge eyes. Mokuzu innocently asked,

“Did Buzz cut go home?”

“Yeah. With a weird look.”

“Then, let's go somewhere together.”

“.....Why? I'm going home too. The purpose of today, Kanajima's and your date, ended.”

Mokuzu became so disappointed it was surprising.

“Why? We just lost Buzz cut.”

“.....Eh? Could it be that that's why you did that?”

Mokuzu didn't answer. She made a face that said, 'Darn it,' a little. Maybe because she noticed that I was angry, she frowned and said,

“B-But.....”

“That's mean.”

“But I just said okay because you said you'd come too. Buzz cut knows that too, right? I don't think it's like I had a duty to please Buzz cut.”

Mokuzu suddenly said something like a reason that didn't make sense and kind of sounded right and kind of sounded arbitrary. I didn't know how to respond. But, the feeling of wanting to oppose Mokuzu was welling up inside my heart. I couldn't stop it. Angrily, I said,

“I don't care anymore. They're all lies. Like mermaids and locked rooms.....”

“Th-They aren't lies!”

Mokuzu objected with a serious expression. Some-

thing unpredictable had risen there, and I stopped talking.

“They aren't lies. It can't be helped that a lot of people don't believe me, though. There's really a commune of mermaids at the bottom of the Sea of Japan, and I'm the mermaids' princess. I'm in the human world right now, but.....it's really different. It's all, all different.”

“.....It isn't different. You can stop already.”

“It is different. Before, I really turned into bubbles and disappeared. I went in my house, and took exactly one minute. Because it takes one minute to become bubbles. It's true.”

“You're full of lies. Umino Mokuzu is a filthy liar.”

“You're wrong!”

Tears started streaming from Mokuzu's dark eyes, and mineral water or drool started falling from her mouth.

“Why don't you understand? They aren't lies. They're all true.”

“Yesterday, you kept saying weird things too. That you were going to buy a machete.....”

The moment I said “machete,” Mokuzu looked startled.

“You said your dad was going to make a dismembered body. Why do you try to tell shocking lies like that? It's stupid. Do you want attention that much? Actually, you're getting what you want. You're getting attention, you're out of place, and people are making fun of you.”

“U, u, uuuuu.....”

Mokuzu started moaning.

“Uuso ja nai yo.<sup>14</sup> Kuu.....”

While tears fell, she said,

“Uuso ja nai.”

“Then, where's the dismembered body? If it's true, it's a murder case. Your dad will be arrested, right? Or, is it like this? The one who killed wasn't the father, but his daughter, you, and your dad got rid of the body for you? Or is it.....”

I was taking it seriously again. It wasn't like me. This wasn't me at all. This whole day, there weren't live rounds anywhere. It looked like I was dragged into Mokuzu's sugar covered, nonsensical world and wasn't myself. I was taking it seriously, and to intent on anticipating Mokuzu's lies, said all the possibilities I could think of.

“.....Oh, that's right. You own a dog, right? A big dog. What was killed wasn't a human, but that huge dog, right? Because if it's a dog, it won't be a case. It's animal cruelty, so there might be an arrest, but it doesn't matter that much—compared to a human. That's it, right? What was dismembered was a dog. Also.....”

“That's right.”

Mokuzu answered smoothly.

I closed my mouth.

“.....Huh?”

“I said, that's right.”

Mokuzu pointed at Mount Nina. The wind blew and made the hems of our skirts sway.

“My dad killed Pochi, who he cared about.”

“.....How?”

“Umm, he hit him with a block.”

“.....”

“I don't think he thought he'd die. He's a huge dog. But he went down and died. And then, my dad cried a lot and said he'd make a grave on the mountain. Because it'd be hard to carry him like that, he got a machete and cut him into four pieces. Last night, he went to Mount Nina to throw him away. My dad wrote a letter for Pochi. It said, 'Goodbye, Pochi.' That's why.....”

Mokuzu first spoke in a monotone but started talking more and more interestedly and became talkative, and Mokuzu finally started talking on and on while waving around both of her hands. I became fed up, turned my back on her, and started walking. I had to go home and make dinner.

Mokuzu came running after me. The ominous sound of her dragging her leg on the ground came near.

“It's true, Yamada Nagisa.”

I stopped walking.

“.....Really?”

“Yeah.”

“Definitely?”

“Yeah.”

“If this is a lie, will you swear you'll never lie again?”

“Ye-.....”

Mokuzu faltered.

“.....Ye-ah.”

“Then, let's go.”

I turned around. I started walking toward Mount Nina. Mokuzu moved her hands around hurriedly and said,

“Go where?”

“Mount Nina. Pochi's grave.”

“Ya-Yamada Nagisa.....”

“It isn't a lie, right?”

After I said that strongly, I forced Mokuzu, who really didn't want to, to come with me, and started walking up Mount Nina's hiking course. Mokuzu was grumbling, but when we started going up the mountain, she started crying.

“Noo!”

“Why? It's the dog you cared about, right?”

“I don't want to seee!”

“I don't either. ....If it's really there.”

∴

And I, now as well, am walking up Mount Nina, which I took Mokuzu up that time.

Early in the morning of October 4—

I remember how Umino Mokuzu followed me while crying.

That time, I was angry. There was the fact that I felt pity for Kanajima, whose name Mokuzu didn't remember no matter how much time passed and who was called things like “that Buzz cut,” and the fact that I got even more angry when Mokuzu said things like, “I got it. You like that Buzz cut. Isn't that right, Yamada Nagisa?” The white and

extravagant Umino house rose in my mind, and anyway, I was really angry. At Mokuzu, who had zero live rounds, and me, who was being led around by her. Like that, I pulled Mokuzu along and walked up Mount Nina.....

“—Nagisa?”

The person who's walking next to me notices my pale face and calls out to me.

The sight of that person grows hazy by the morning mist, and disappears and reappears. The white mist envelops us and frees us like a delicate veil.

“Nagisa, are you all right?”

that person whispers. I somehow nod.

“.....Y-Yeah.”

“Want to rest?”

“No, I'm fine.”

I shake my head.

“.....Besides, I'm worried. I want to find out quickly.”

“Okay. Let's go.”

The morning of October 4—

Right now, again, I'm going up Mount Nina.

∴

“Hey, what kind of guy is your brother? Hey.”

A while after we started walking up Mount Nina, even while slipping on the wet moss and screaming at

the spider webs, my nonsensical, new friend, Umino Mokuzu, pulled herself together considerably, became quiet, and afterward, wanted to talk a lot. Even though I was being silent with displeasure, Mokuzu incessantly asked questions, repeated the questions she asked, and told me her own guesses.

“Hey, hey, hey.....”

“You're annoying, geez.”

The mountain road was full of moss, there were ferns and some kinds of weeds at my feet, and above, there were tree branches and spiderwebs, so it was hard to walk. I was wearing sneakers, but Mokuzu's small and delicate feet were in lovely mules that were like ones a grown woman would wear, so she slipped a lot and when she was about to fall over, she screamed. Even while doing that, she kept talking to me.

It seemed Mokuzu—was afraid of silence. Incessantly, she drank her saliva, drank mineral water like she was showering in it, and then said,

“Hey, what kind of brother is he? Do you two look alike?”

Mount Nina was eerily silent, and it was like there were no other living things. Mokuzu's high-pitched voice traveled very far. I gave up, and while still being displeased, said,

“He used to be an honor student. He's good-looking and refreshing. Right now, he's, hmm.....an apparition.”

“An apparition?”

“Right. My place is an apparition's forest. I'm the manager.”

While talking and moving about, I thought about my brother, the beautiful apparition, Tomohiko. Based on my memories from when I was very young, Tomohiko was originally a very normal boy. He was intelligent and read books a lot, though he was a little weird sometimes. His weirdness included climbing up a tree he didn't have to and, just as expected, falling and fracturing his leg, or swimming in a river and almost drowning, or doing reckless things that were a mystery to girls, but were common for boys, or about that.

Three years ago, my brother stopped living his own life. He secluded himself in his small room and thought about many things, smiled, ate the minimum amount of food necessary, and.....

My brother became an observer.

For every phenomenon—

I wonder if that's 'The View of Gods,' I thought vaguely. A great god who just observed humans from above the clouds and even if someone was dying or someone was praying, would say, "Hmhm," and watch. Tomohiko was becoming something like that. That was.....

not my Oniichan...anymore.

When I was really small, there was a time when looking for me, who had become lost, Tomohiko ran around the grounds of a summer festival for me. Tomohiko had just gotten into middle school, and I was still small. When I was crying at the center for lost children, Tomohiko rushed in like a superhero. "Nagisaa!" he called out to his sister with his low voice

that had just changed, and said, "Ah...you were here..." and sat down on the ground without strength. He was consoled and given juice by an adult from the center for lost children, but still, Tomohiko blamed himself, who strayed away from his sister, and felt down the whole night.

Back then, Tomohiko was scary sometimes. When I did things like play his games or eat snacks by myself, he got really angry. There were times when he was mean. But there were also times when he was really kind.

Right now, Tomohiko is neither one. My brother would never run or yell for me again, I thought vaguely. And when I thought how there weren't any guys in this world who'd run for me who didn't have a father or a brother and of course still didn't have a boyfriend, despair closed in on me.

".....Ah, that's right."

"Hm?"

Suddenly, I wanted to ask Mokuzu, who was walking with me, a question, and looked at her, who was beside me. While wiping the sweat that rose to her forehead, Mokuzu said,

"It's hot. I feel sluggish too. Let's go back."

"No. Hey....."

I remembered how last night, I had a trivial conversation with my brother who became a god, Tomohiko. Tomohiko said, <Do you know the quiz that's bad to get right?> to me with a really elegant smile. It happened during the short time we had for

conversation while we ate dinner. Tomohiko said,

<Okay Nagisa, don't get it right.>

<Wh-Why?>

<There are only five people in history who've been able to answer this correctly.>

After he finished warning me, he faced me, who was troubled, swayed his long hair, seeming to be having fun, and told me.

<A certain man died. By a silly accident, you see. The man had a wife and a child. The man's coworker attended the funeral. The coworker and the wife, despite the kind of time it was, started getting along. Well, they became attracted to each other. Incidentally, that night, believe it or not, the man's child was killed. The culprit was the wife. She suddenly killed her own child. Now, why did she do it?>

<Wh-Why.....?>

When I thought, 'How would I know?' and was blinking with surprise, Tomohiko smiled satisfactorily and said,

<You look puzzled, my sister.>

<Yeah, of course.>

<You don't know, right?>

<.....Sorry that I don't. I don't at all.>

<That's great, Nagisa. You're the owner of a normal mind.>

<Huh.>

Tomohiko grinned and happily said,

<For one theory, this is a question that's used for youths who commit abnormal crimes. With normal

youths, 99.999.....percent of them can't answer it correctly. There are only five people in history who've been able to answer it correctly. They are.....>

One after another, Tomohiko gave the names of the children who were the culprits of the famous bizarre incidents that occurred in the past ten years. When I was looking at him vacantly, he said,

<The quiz that's bad to get right. It is now complete. My sister is normal. Well then, Nagisa.>

Leaving me, who was being vacant, behind, he closed the fusuma.

—I remembered that and asked Mokuzu, who was walking beside me, that quiz. Mokuzu was nodding while drinking mineral water, but said,

“.....Why?”

“Who knows?”

“Why did the kid die? Eh, the wife? .....I don't know. Ehh~.....why?”

This morning, when I made breakfast and brought it to Tomohiko, I got Tomohiko, who was half asleep, to tell me the answer to the quiz which I couldn't get even though I thought about it the whole night, but I wanted to be mean right now, so I didn't tell Mokuzu the answer.

“You can answer it with one word.”

“Ehh~. How many characters? How many characters?”

“Umm.....one, two, three, four.....five characters.”

“Hmm..... With hiragana? With kanji?”

“It's five characters either way. You don't know?”

“.....I doon't,”

Mokuzu murmured sullenly.

I felt like I had proved that Mokuzu was an unexpectedly normal girl, and was a little relieved. But I was also a little disappointed. When I thought, 'Oh, she's just a girl who lies a little,' it was a little of a let-down.

Mokuzu was probably way more normal than she looked and only wanted people to pay attention to her. Even now, she couldn't go back after telling a lie that she wanted to me with and was troubled. Mokuzu was undoubtedly thinking about how she was going to get around the dismembered dog that wouldn't be there no matter how far we walked.

The slope of the mountain began to become steep, and we started breathing hard.

After a while, the field of view opened up. The trees and shrubs started thinning, and we came out to a place where only one old, wood bench was slanted. The town could be seen far below, and the dull Sea of Japan spread far. Mokuzu murmured, "Hmm....." In the town, slightly tall buildings were crowded together, and in the middle of them was the station. The dilapidated roof of the long and narrow shopping arcade. Besides them were a long asphalt road, paddy fields, and houses here and there.

Old fishing boats were anchored at the shore. There was a group of old trucks.

It was a small, small world. It was like an old miniature garden.

I got a strange feeling, like my chest was being squeezed. I was kind of embarrassed that the pretty,

fashionable, mule-wearing celebrity's daughter who came from the city, Umino Mokuzu, saw this scene, and it made me angry.

At that time, Mokuzu murmured, "Hmm, it's pretty, isn't it?" while stretching. I tried to answer and opened my mouth but couldn't find words, and with a kind of frustrated, kind of relieved, but not really relieved, complicated feeling, closed my mouth without saying anything.

Without even noticing how I was, Mokuzu already forgot about the scenery, remembered the quiz instead, and grumbled, "I don't know after all. ....But, well, it's all right." Then this time, she started asking about my brother again. While answering her, I felt that Tomohiko's image was gradually being formed in Mokuzu's mind.

And I felt a strange discomfort at that too.

In short, I didn't want Mokuzu to pity me.

She, who was the only daughter of a famous performer, could use her father's gold card freely, and had a beautiful face like her actress mother, should have been able to start distinctly seeing my position of living in the country and being poor and having a dark future and having no father and having had the brother I was relying on become a total hikikomori. I was embarrassed. It felt like if someone said even one thing that denied the "Oniichan faith"-like thing that was only coherent inside me, it would collapse, and I was scared.

Mokuzu murmured while walking.

"I never met him before, so I don't know, but"

“.....”

“Your brother seems really kind. You're a good girl too. You think about your family. You seem close to your brother too. He's probably a very good brother. I'm sure he is, Yamada Nagisa.”

I became dumbfounded and looked at the side of Mokuza's pale face as she, with all her effort, began stressing that. Mokuza's expression was really one of desperation. It seemed that for me, who was feeling down, she was shooting a barrage of bullets of good feelings—even if they weren't based on anything.

While becoming tired, but while noticing the other thing that was hidden under Umino Mokuza's very strange skin and understanding, I continued walking.

The other day, when I talked about my dad dying storm and she kept saying stuff like how he was happy in the bottom of the sea without listening to me telling her to stop, maybe this weird girl intended on making up a story for me.

That's what I thought. Mokuza's kindness was off and a bother, and it was troubling that she was highly praising Tomohiko, who she hadn't even meet before, but regarding that sticky sugar candy, I couldn't get that angry, and simply continued walking in silence.

Mokuza finally became more and more quiet, the sun began to set little by little, we wiped the sweat off our foreheads and brushed away spiderwebs, and—.

In the depths of the animal trail, there was an isolated, open place. It was a dim, damp plot of land in the depths of the forest, where it seemed a small house could be

built. There was a hill that was like a pile of dry leaves.

Something was stacked on top of it.

Some parts of it were red, and some parts of it were black.

What was it?

Mokuzu pointed at that red and black thing and spoke sadly.

“.....Pochi!”

I noticed.

The body of a dog that had been split up by a machete.

I went on my knees then, and vomited.

∴

I'm walking up Mount Nina.

The same path as that time. Unlike that day that was sunset, it's early in the morning and the sun is about to rise. But the dim light gives me a strange sense of *déjà vu*, and while my shoulders shake, I increase my speed and walk up.

The remains of the night dew make the moss shine. I lose my footing and I almost fall.

The grass is wet too, and I slip.

The fallen leaves shine as they rot, and there are small, white flowers that have just bloomed.

We finally come out to that open place, and come to a place where I can see the sea and the small, slightly dirty town—the old miniature garden. The one bench that had been left there is tilted, and

seems like it's more than half rotten.

The sea is—

being illuminated by the rising morning sun and shining palely.

I look at it, and think, it's pretty.

“Are you all right, Nagisa?”

There's a voice.

When I raise my head, Tomohiko, who walks beside me, looks at me and asks.

I take a deep breath.

“Ye-ah.....”

Seeing my brother's worrisome face, I nod and start walking faster.

And,

I...remember.....

What I saw that time.

∴

Seeing me vomit repeatedly, Mokuzu panicked and while crying, said, “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Yamada Nagisa, I'm sorry.....!” rubbed my back, sobbed, clung to my arm, and doused the back of my head with mineral water for some reason.

That was, the black parts being short, sleek fur that looked beautiful like a velvet rug, a dog. The red parts were the parts that where it had been chopped by a machete. The dog had been violently divided into four parts. They were neatly stacked in one place, and the

head was placed on the top of them.

Its big ears drooped loosely.

Its long tongue was hanging and looked like another living thing.

Big flies were buzzing as they swarmed.

Even though Umينو Mokuzu was disturbed, talking very quickly, she said,

“But, you said you wanted to see him. Pochi. He was alive until yesterday. Until around thirty minutes before I met you at the supermarket. When my dad hit him with a block, his brains came out and it looked like he died, and when my dad tried to lift him up, Pochi was huge, so he didn't budge an inch, and my dad's impulsive, but he isn't strong. The two of us went out to find a machete. We couldn't leave him in the house, right? His brains were coming out. Right?”

“U..... Nn.....”

“Yamada Nagisa, get a hold of yourself!”

I was crying and crying and crying. Mokuzu was crying a lot and kept apologizing to me.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.....!”

“.....Uu. Hey, you.....”

I finally got up unsteadily, and while panting heavily, looked at her face. She looked at me with her huge, dark eyes that seemed like they would suck me in. Her clear tears kept falling. We looked at each other in front of the dog's dismembered body.

“Did you care about that dog?”

Mokuzu tilted her head curiously.

“Yeah, well. I had him from when he was a puppy.”

“How old?”

“He was two. He was still young.”

When Mokuzu murmured that, she smiled while crying.

I unsteadily went near that red and black thing.

With really dirty, but characters that seemed to be written with all their effort, there was one paper that had 'goodbye, pochi' written on it. It looked like a child's handwriting.

I was standing still.

“.....How?”

I turned around and asked Mokuzu.

Mokuzu didn't move an inch. Sometimes Mokuzu completely 'pretended not to hear.' She didn't react at all. One more time, I asked,

“How?”

but Mokuzu didn't answer. I turned around and started running. I was going to go down the mountain. Mokuzu started coming after me from behind while dragging her leg.

“Yamada Nagisa? Why are you running? Hey, why are you running away?”

I didn't answer. In my head, the refrain of Umino Masachika's hit song 'Mermaid's Bones' started playing. The third verse. The third verse. Yes, the problem was the third verse. It was a verse that was like a dismemberment murder. A song about chopping up a mermaid, making it into sashimi, and eating it. It was that weird, old band that played the strange song as a sentimental ballad.

Mokuzu shouted like she was scared for some reason.

“It wasn't me! It wasn't me!”

“Huh!?”

“I-It was my dad. My dad did it. I-I d-didn't do it. No. It wasn't me.....! It's true.....!”

I-I know that!

I stopped running and decided to go down the mountain by walking quickly. From behind me, it felt like Mokuzu was desperately following me while falling and slipping. With a big voice, she yelled,

“Uwaa, I fell in a hole!”

and sang absurd songs.

“Ah, a ghost! Look, there!”

I pretended she didn't say anything and kept walking. Mokuzu gradually became dispirited and followed behind downheartedly.

The sun started to set, and the temperature started to drop.

“Yamada Nagisa, it's cold, isn't it?”

“.....Want to wear this?”

When I took the cardigan I had brought in case the movie theater was too cool and handed it to her, Mokuzu accepted that cheap, plain, black cardigan like it was a treasure. When Mokuzu wore it, it looked stylish like a brand good. Maybe because she liked it, Mokuzu happily said,

“Hey, can I have this?”

“.....No!”

“Maan.”

Mokuzu looked sullen.

Then she guzzled mineral water again.

For the first time, I realized, 'Ah, Umino Mokuzu is more unfortunate than me.'

I thought, 'That's so sad,' and the feeling of opposing her that I had until now and my trying to think of her as a happy rich kid to the end, and my being obstinate in thinking that someone like her wouldn't understand how I felt—the breakwaters like that that I had collapsed instantly. And then for the first time, I thought Umino Mokuzu was my friend.

But an unpleasant feeling that resembled self-hatred closed in on me and quickly tormented me. A twisted self-consciousness was mixed in what I felt as I thought of Umino Mokuzu, and I hated that. I.....

∴

What I saw that time.

And, the animal trail that I went down in a hurry like I was running away.

While hesitating, I keep walking up silently.

The surface of the sea that shines whitely is reflecting the morning sun. The fallen leaves at my feet are make damp, unpleasant, sounds as they are flattened. The moss gradually starts becoming dense. The surface of the rocks are wet and are shining darkly.

Early in the morning of October 4—.

Even though Tomohiko, who is walking beside me, had been quiet, he suddenly opened his mouth.

“Nagisa.”

“Hm?”

“Have you heard of 'Stockholm syndrome' before?”

I shook my head.

Tomohiko started talking lightly.

“It's about a mental state that the victims of kidnappings fall into. It got the name from an incident that actually occurred in Stockholm. Victims of kidnappings.....”

With a quiet voice, Tomohiko started talking about kidnapping for some reason.

The forest was wet with morning mist, enveloped in silence, and a little chilly.

∴

.....I went down and down and down Mount Nina like I was rolling and finally reached the road on which the evening sun fell on the cracked asphalt. Without responding to Mokuzu, who followed me while making strange noises, I went into a weird, run-down store that was kind of like a liquor store, kind of like a convenience store, bought juice, and came out unsteadily. Mokuzu replenished her supply of mineral water too. Next to Mokuzu, who gulped, threw her head back, and drank mineral water like she was showering in it, I, while my heart was beating fast, pulled the tab of the juice and drank a little.

I calmed down a little.

Mokuzu and I stood still for a while without talking at

the side of the road and concentrated on hydrating. The sun finally set, and it became dim. The summer evening ended. Mount Nina was towering above as always, and was taking in the evening sun and being illuminated orange.

I started walking slowly. I had to go home and make dinner. But that live round seemed far away right now. It was like, 'Dinner? At a time like this?'

From beyond my gaze, as I was walking, a bicycle came near in the dim light. A buzz cut, T-shirt and jeans, and old sneakers. ....It was Kanajima. Kanajima didn't notice us for a while, but he finally noticed the instant we passed each other,

"Huh?"

raised his voice and stopped the bicycle with a screech. Then curiously, he looked at Mokuzu's and my faces.

"What're you guys doing?"

Unable to answer, I panted heavily and just looked at Kanajima. First Kanajima said to me,

"Didn't you go home?"

then looked at Mokuzu, and said,

"You.....why're you here?"

We couldn't answer, and Kanajima's face gradually became stern. A lukewarm wind blew and made our hair and the hems of our skirts sway. Kanajima finally said coldly,

"You guys suck."

"Wh-.....?"

"You two tricked me, right? What do you mean you became bubbles and disappeared? Screw you!"

I panicked and said,  
“Kanajima, that's not.....”

When I started talking, Kanajima was already pedaling, and was going far away with the bicycle. I tried to call out to him, but no strength went in my body, and I vacantly saw off the boy who I made misunderstand, hurt, and seemed to have made angry.

Mokuzu grinned,  
“He found out,”

and seeming to be happy for some reason, murmured that.

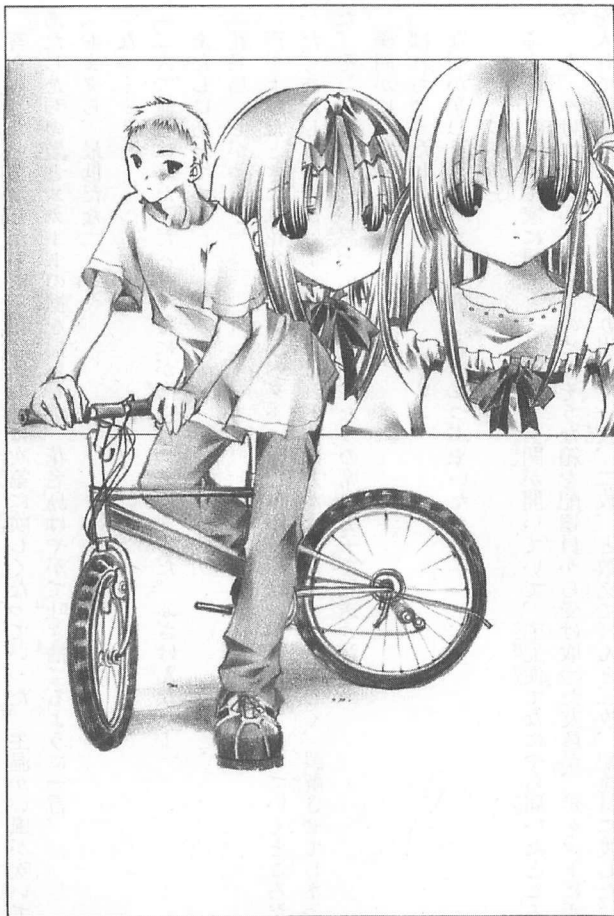
When I went home unsteadily, the entrance was just open and something was being delivered. Tomohiko, who accepted the box that was awfully big but seemed light from the deliveryman, put his hand in his pocket, casually took out ten thousand yen bills, and counting one bill, two bills, he handed three bills to the deliveryman. Tomohiko, who didn't have a credit card, or rather, couldn't get one because he was unemployed, used cash on delivery mail order.

The same amount of money that would pay for the food of three people for a month disappeared into the deliveryman's wallet in exchange for the huge and light box. Tomohiko, who looked at me while brushing up his long hair, started saying, “Welcome home, Nagi-sa.....” and stared at my face.

“.....I'm home. I'll make...dinner...no...w.”

“Nagisa?”

Tomohiko got into a panic for some reason, and after



throwing the huge and light box from the entranceway to the room, pushed the deliveryman's shoulder and violently drove him out of the entranceway. Then he put his hands on my shoulders after I came in, brushed his hair up and looked into my eyes.

The door slowly started closing, and made a sound.

“What's wrong, Nagisa?”

“Before, today, you...see.....”

I couldn't find the words. It seemed my nervousness disappeared the moment I saw my brother's face, I kept opening and closing my mouth, breathed in, wiped my tears, and then collapsed into Tomohiko's skinny, hard chest. My body shook. Tomohiko hugged me tightly and didn't move.

I finally calmed down and when I told in pieces what happened after I went out today, Tomohiko sat in the chair he always did in his room, made a stern face, and nodded while listening. Unlike my usual brother, who did things at his own pace, he didn't suddenly stop the conversation and put his headphones on or close the fusuma or say, “Well then, Nagisa.” While looking at my face like he was worried about me, he nodded with a serious expression.

When I finally finished talking, Tomohiko said,

“What happened with the dog is very frightening.”  
in a quiet voice.

“.....Yeah.”

“It's a strange, frightening thing. It's natural that you were shocked.”

“Ye-ah.”

Tomohiko patted my head and waited silently until I calmed down. When around thirty minutes passed, I was calm, and my face had regained color, Tomohiko reservedly, in a soft voice, said,

“Nagisa.”

“Yeah?”

“If it would make you feel better,”

“What?”

“I want to talk about psychological misdirection.”

I wiped my tears and looked at Tomohiko.

Tomohiko looked back at me with a worried expression. I didn't really get it, so I asked him.

“Eh, what? Psychological.....?”

“Yeah, psychological misdirection. It's what people call a 'psychological trick.’”

When Tomohiko stood up, he picked up the box that he had thrown casually before and started ripping it open. From inside, things like wands and silk hats and eggs came out one after the other. When I was being surprised, Tomohiko smiled elegantly and said,

“When I was researching magic, I got interested in this too. It seems that the magi of old times were like what we call magicians now. They either revealed the secret of their magic tricks, or deceived people and said it was magic. Nagisa, what that girl used was a psychological trick. It's a basic tool that's used in magic tricks. If that girl thought of that when you told her to prove that she could disappear, I think she's a pretty creative, interesting girl.”

When Tomohiko took tissue paper, he crumpled it up.

He showed it to me and coughed once. And then he put his hands together and chanted some incantation. Then he took his hands apart, squeezed both of his hands tightly, and said,

“Which hand do you think the tissue is in?”

“Ehh? I-I don't know.”

“Try guessing.”

I was troubled, but without a choice, said,

“Umm, this one?”

I pointed at his right hand. Tomohiko quietly opened his hand. His right hand was empty.

“Then, the left?”

He opened his left hand too.

The tissue wasn't there either.

Tomohiko smiled and pointed behind my back. There was a tissue on the ground behind me. When I looked at Tomohiko in puzzlement, he said,

“Before, when I showed you the tissue, I coughed, right? At that time, I secretly threw the tissue behind you. When I put my hands together, the tissue wasn't in either of them anymore.”

“Ah, ahh.....”

Tomohiko continued, put his hand in his pocket, and took out a five hundred yen coin.

“I'll make it disappear with the power of an incantation.”

When he said that, while coughing again, he moved it from his right hand to his left hand. When he chanted some incantation and opened his left hand, the coin had disappeared. I pointed at his right hand

and said “It's here, right?” Then Tomohiko opened his right hand. His right hand was empty too.

“Ehh~? Where did it go?”

“I hid it here.”

Tomohiko took the coin out from the sleeve of his right arm.

To me, who was dumbfounded, he said,

“This is psychological misdirection.”

“Oniichan..... Sorry, I don't get it at all.”

“It's a trick that uses a psychological blind spot. It's something that's used a lot in magic tricks. You see, the secret of magic tricks isn't to use a trick at time zero, when you say you're going to do something amazing. At time zero, the trick is already over. At the time zero when the tissue should have been in one of my hands, the tissue had actually moved far away already. At the time zero when the coin was supposed to disappear from my left hand, the coin was already in my right hand, and when you were looking at my left hand, I put it into the sleeve of my right arm. Of course, my magic tricks are poor-quality. This is the first time I've put it into practice.”

“Really? You were really good, Oniichan.”

“Thank you, Nagisa.”

Tomohiko smiled.

Then he patted my head and said,

“The secret to not being found out is to say an incantation at time zero so people focus on it. And when you're really going to use the trick, you cough or something like I did and draw attention away. What your

friend did is that too.”

I was silent.

That time.....

Umino Mokuzu kept emphasizing that she would “go in her house and one minute later, become bubbles and vanish.” She looked at her watch several times. Then she went in her house, and a minute passed. When I went to look for her, she wasn't in her house, and every place other than the entryway was locked from the inside.

“When that girl went into her house, something happened, right? Nagisa, try to remember.”

Yes.....

Just at five in the evening, a siren started going off somewhere. Mokuzu turned her head a little in the direction the siren was going off. Kanajima and I also, for just a moment, looked far into the sky.

And when we looked back at the entryway, the door closed.

Then one minute passed.

“.....I-I see.”

“Yes. That siren was the cough. I'm sure that girl looked at her watch, and waited for the siren to go off at five. Then she opened the door and listened to the siren. You two look away. There were hedges in front of the house, right? That girl took her hand away from the door and hid in the hedges. Without anyone going in the house, the door closed by itself. Not one minute later. The trick was set up way before time zero. I'm sure, Nagisa, that there's no mistake with this.”

Tomohiko laughed.

He gently embraced my head and whispered.

“Do you feel a little better?”

“Ye-ah.....”

I really didn't know. Whether I was relieved like, 'So that's what happened,' now that I knew that there was a trick. Or whether I was disappointed. I didn't really know.

I felt like I had been led around.

I felt a strange feeling of irritation.

I groaned and lay down on the ground of Tomohiko's room. With the magic tricks Tomohiko just bought, he started doing things like making flowers appear from a wand with a serious expression.

While lying on the ground, I thought, “I have to make dinner.” Dinner, dinner. Then I sprung up, went to the kitchen, and faster than I usual did, started cutting the vegetables.

## Notes

- 1 Umino Mokuzu: “Umino” means “sea plain,” and “mokuzu” means “scraps of seaweed.” Becoming “umi no mokuzu” (lit. becoming scraps of seaweed in the sea) means to die at sea.
- 2 Kanajima: “Flower name island.”
- 3 Yamada: “Mountain rice field.”
- 4 Nagisa: “Beach.”
- 5 Masachika: “Graceful love.”
- 6 ikezukuri: preparation of sashimi from live seafood ([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ikizukuri](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ikizukuri))
- 7 Umino Mokuzu desu: “(I’m) Umino Mokuzu.”
- 8 So: “Yeah.”
- 9 Sonna koto arimasen: “That isn’t correct.”
- 10 I: Mokuzu uses “boku.”
- 11 live rounds: This can mean money.
- 12 I: Mokuzu suddenly starts using “atashi” (like Nagisa) instead of “boku” here for some reason. I believe this is the only place in the story where she does this.
- 13 Hands: Nickname for the department store Tokyu Hands.
- 14 Uso ja nai yo: “They aren’t lies.”

## Credits

Translation/Editing: kanyu  
Special Thanks: Maple Colours

## Chapter 2    All Alone with the Sugar Candy Bullet

∴

“Nagisa, Have you heard of 'Stockholm syndrome' before?”

I shook my head.

Tomohiko started talking lightly.

“It's about a mental state that the victims of kidnappings fall into. It got the name from an incident that actually occurred in Stockholm. Victims of kidnappings.....”

With a quiet voice, Tomohiko started talking about kidnapping for some reason.

The forest was wet with morning mist, enveloped in silence, and a little chilly. The slope is steep, and the roots of trees and ferns are tangled together, so I lose my footing sometimes and almost fall. The white morning sun spills from the sky above the forest. From the damp air came the quiet,  
unrestful, aura of morning.

Early in the morning of October 4—.

While walking, Tomohiko continues talking.

“The kidnapped victims have their freedom taken away, aren't even allowed to think, and spend days with the culprit in a locked room.....”

“Yeah.....”

Tomohiko and I, who walk the mossy animal trail, speed up and move our feet systematically like we're in a march with only two people.

I hear Tomohiko talk without really listening. My brother's voice is clear and feels kind of refreshing to hear.

"Then, Nagisa, it's the same system religious groups, self-help seminars, and training sessions for new employees use, but the vessel, which has become empty because they aren't allowed to think, becomes filled up with something new. Like a religion's creed, a new way of seeing yourself, loyalty to your company....."

"Yeah....."

"In the case of kidnappings, it's sympathy and loyalty toward the culprit. The longer they're held captive, the more the victims support the culprits even after they're rescued, and repeatedly try to defend them in court."

A small bird chirps.

The morning sun enters the forest little by little, and it starts becoming more and more bright. The smell of dirt and rotten leaves hangs in the air. There are no clouds in the sky, and it is very high and clear.

"At the incident in Stockholm, the daughter of a wealthy family went missing and, a few years later, the video from a security camera that showed her acting violently as one of the members of the terrorist group was distributed to

the world and shocked it.”

“Hmm.....”

I look at Tomohiko's face while wondering what he's talking about. The slope of the mountain had become steep, and little by little, I know that we're nearing that place.

It seems Tomohiko's face is becoming different from that elegant, beautiful, aristocratic face. While going up Mount Nina, Tomohiko starts changing moment by moment. Tomohiko himself doesn't notice that.

Tomohiko continues talking.

“I think victims of child abuse show symptoms that can be categorized as a certain kind of 'Stockholm syndrome.' A long period of confinement and abuse. The aggressors are their parents, who they're supposed to love and who's supposed to love them. What happens? They become more extremely, sadly, attached to their parents than normal children who haven't been abused. They don't say bad things about their parents. In fact, there are cases where they blame themselves. That's why it's hard to detect. Because of a mistaken function of the brain, they feel an extreme love for their worthless parents. There's the tragedy.”

I looked up at the side of Tomohiko's face in a daze.

Chirp chirp chirp..... A small bird is chirping from the tree of a branch high above.

The forest is damp, dim, and mossy.

“Ye-ah.....”

I nod.

I kind of.....got the feeling that I understood what Tomohiko was talking about.

A small bird chirps again.

I was walking quietly for a while, but I thought, walked again, thought, and then answered Tomohiko in a small voice.

“Oniichan.....”

“Hm?”

“I know who you're talking about.”

∴

Since the day I saw that dog that was cut into pieces with a machete and vomited, even when I met Mokuzu, I only greeted her and put a little distance between us. It wasn't like it was Mokuzu's fault, and it wasn't like I was angry at Mokuzu either, but.....in short, I drew back.

I didn't tell my mom or my brother or my friends but to tell the truth I was very dissatisfied with the environment I was in, and it seemed that somehow before I knew it that dissatisfaction or unhappiness became part of my self image. Thinking, 'I'm unfortunate, I'm pitiable,' supported me, and that was involved with my whole view of my future.

I felt for me, who deeply held that dark view, the existence of Umino Mokuzu, who might be more

unfortunate than me—who was given a weird name when she was born, had a father who was a famous singer, and was very pretty girl—threatened every part of me. That wasn't Mokuzu's fault. Mokuzu was a strange girl as usual, guzzled mineral water, and even when sometimes, underclassmen and people from other classes came to the classroom after hearing the rumor that Umino Masachika's daughter was here and whispered things like, “She's pretty.....” she sat uninterestedly by herself at the back of the room. Around every other day, she swung a water bottle at my back as I tried to go back. Every time I felt something hit my back, I turned back and slowly picked up the water bottle that fell on the floor or the schoolyard, walked up to Mokuzu and handed it to her, and turned around and walked away again. While doing that, September was ending. One day, after school, when Mokuzu took the water bottle I thrust back to her as she had a face that looked like she was going to cry, at my back, while I was walking away, she took a sugary bullet, and shot it.

“Yamada Nagisa, a storm's going to come.”

“.....No it won't,”

I said without even turning back. Mokuzu became serious, and while dragging her leg on the ground, said

“It'll really come. From the evening of October 3 to morning. A big storm's going to come. A storm that isn't in the weather forecast. The storm that comes once every ten years is going to come. Boats will sink, the coastline will be distorted, and my allies will come

from all the seas in the world. Because I'm the princess.....”

“Stop it! Don't talk about boats!”

When I turned around with an expression of anger, Mokuzu looked puzzled. While murmuring, “Why are you angry, Yamada Nagisa?” she looked like she was about to cry. If possible, I wanted to explain exactly how insensible and how much it hurt me to have the fact that my father really disappeared along with the boat he was on become part of a lie, but I got the feeling that Mokuzu wouldn't get it even if I told her, so I didn't say anything. But seeing Mokuzu's face as she fidgeted while she looked like she was about to cry but was still trying to shoot sugar candy, I thought, 'Ah, this girl's my friend,' for some reason. When I turned my back on her, started walking again, and turned back after a while, Mokuzu was weeping like a child. I said,

“Hey! Will you take care of the rabbits with me?”

“.....I will!”

Mokuzu yelled and came running while dragging her leg. She ran and stopped in front of me. Then she grinned happily.

At the rabbit hutch, Mokuzu narrowed her eyes distrustfully and looked at the white rabbits that were munching cabbages. After she tried to clean up by copying me and flipped various things over, fell, and made her uniform dirty, she said, “Ahh~.....” and put her head in her hands.

“What?”

“Rabbits are cute, but they smell, don't they?”

“Well, humans are cute too, but they smell if they don't take baths.”

“Mhh.....”

“But Tomohiko.....my Oniichan only bathes once a week, but he doesn't smell at all.”

“What is that? That's a really amazing brother. He doesn't smell, huh?”

“Not at all. He's refreshing to be around. A prince-type.”

While looking intently at the white, fluffy rabbits, Mokuzu nodded. Then she raised her head. With a peaceful look that was the same as when she was looking at the rabbits, she said,

“You like taking care of rabbits.”

“Yeah.”

“You like taking care of your brother too, right?”

“Ye-ah.....”

“You're in charge of raising things.”

I felt uneasy. After that, I became quiet and continued cleaning. Without seeming to even notice me, the rabbits pooped, ate carrots, and dozed in the corners.

When I finished everything and stood up, I prompted Mokuzu, and we went out of the rabbit hutch together. Mokuzu looked curiously at my hands as I closed the number dial lock.

“Oh yeah, Mokuzu.”

While closing the lock, I said,

“Tomohiko saw through your trick.”

“Trick?”

Mokuzu asked curiously.

“The trick you used to become bubbles and disappear.”

“Bubbles are bubbles, Yamada Nagisa.”

“No, there was a trick. Tomohiko said you were a wonderful girl. It looked like he liked you.”

“I don't like it. What is that?”

Mokuzu's cheeks became dyed red with resentment or jealousy, and she violently kicked the rocks at her feet. I laughed and said,

“Psychological misdirection. He said you probably used a psychological trick.”

“Hahaha, hahahahaha.”

Mokuzu started laughing.

While bending her head back and laughing, she dragged her leg on the ground and left the schoolyard. Clink..... The noises and yells that came from the baseball team could be heard from the middle of the schoolyard. I suddenly felt a gaze and turned around. A baseball cap and uniform and spiked shoes, a boy with a buzz cut was looking intently. It might be Kanajima. Though I don't know. My chest hurt a little.

While laughing, Mokuzu said,

“Your brother, I'm sure, looks at the same site I do.”

“Site?”

“Nowadays, if you want to know a lot, it's the internet. Yamada Nagisa, tell your brother.”

“Wh-What?”

“This time, no one will be able to see through it. I'll

completely become bubbles.”

When Mokuzu said that exaggeratedly in a challenging way like a magician would say to his viewers, she looked at my face and grinned.

The day strange incidents occurred in succession was the next morning.

When I came a little before school started to see the rabbits and was cutting straight across the schoolyard, I saw a boy wearing his summer uniform standing in front of the rabbit pen. He had a buzz cut. As I got close, I knew that it was Kanajima. I went near while I was in a daze after having woken up and tried to ask Kanajima, 'What's up? Morning practice?'

Kanajima was holding something in his hand.

It was white.

I noticed that was fluffy fur and thought that Kanajima was holding a rabbit. While thinking 'What a rough way to hold it,' I increased my pace. And as I got close to him, I noticed that there was something wrong with the rabbit's shape.

It was white, round, and fluffy.

—But it didn't have a head.

I screamed. I ran toward Kanajima, and then faced the rabbit hutch and saw the disastrous scene. The lock was open and the door was wide open, and the inside was a sea of blood. Many white rabbits were on the ground, the lukewarm smell of blood filled the air, and there were a lot of footprints from a boy that seemed to have been made by Kanajima.

“.....Only this one doesn't have a head.”

I heard Kanajima's hoarse voice.

When I turned around, the boy with the buzz cut who sat next to me was looking down at me with a pale face. He brought up the body of the rabbit he was holding and said,

“I looked, but this one's the only one without a head, Yamada.....”

Without saying anything, I looked up at Kanajima's pale face.

Kanajima and I were led to the reception office that was next to the the principal's office, were asked what happened by people like the principal and the school nurse and our homeroom teacher, answered, the rabbit hutch was covered by tarp while that was happening, and the morning classes started without us.

Kanajima didn't say much. It seemed he came to school early for voluntary practice, and found that. Kanajima kept repeating, “It didn't have a head. Just one didn't have a head.” I almost cried, resisted it, and just sat in a daze next to Kanajima.

After it became lunch, Kanajima and I could finally go back to our classroom. Kanajima kept silent the whole time, but he went in the classroom, was surrounded by Eiko and the others who were excited by the rumors and answered their questions, sat in his seat and looked in front in a daze, and then.....

Kanajima suddenly stood up.

Then he turned around.

“Hey, Umino.”

His voice was low.

Mokuzu was standing by the window and resting her chin on her hand listlessly, which she usually didn't do. Outside the window were vibrant ears of rice, and a long, asphalt road that stretched for a long distance. And far away, the sea was a dark, grey color as usual and drew near and went back.

Mokuzu, who was looking at the sea like that, noticed that her name was called after a lot of time passed and, slowly, turned back curiously.

“Yeah, crazy girl,”

Kanajima said in a heavy, low voice.

I became surprised and tried to stop Kanajima. But Kanajima pushed me away and said,

“Umino, you did it, right?”

The classroom became full of noise.

“I saw this morning. Even though you always come right before class starts or completely after it starts, you were early today, weren't you?”

Mokuzu grimaced. Kanajima went near Mokuzu and said,

“Yesterday, you saw Yamada closing the lock to the rabbit hutch, didn't you? That's why you knew how to open it. And then you came early this morning, opened the lock, and killed the rabbits. Because you want to get Yamada's attention. Right? Because you'd do anything to get Yamada's attention.”

I went near the the two. Kanajima's face was red with anger and irritation. Mokuzu was calm and

looked up at Kanajima like she was looking at an idiot and said,

“Why are you so angry?”

“.....When I look at you, I get pissed off.”

“Then you shouldn't ask me to go to the movies.”

The class stirred. Mokuzu didn't know the difference between what she could and couldn't say after all. I tried to stop her. At that time, Mokuzu said,

“I remembered your name. Kanajima Shouta. I know your birthday too. It's May 27, right?”

Kanajima held his breath.

Murmuring things like 'Ah.....' and 'U.....' with a red face, he lost his words. Mokuzu, with a composed and uninflected voice, said,

“Yamada Nagisa likes Kanajima Shouta. I looked it up yesterday. I thought in the class register, there was a boy whose birthday was on May 27. Do you know why? The lock to that rabbit pen, you see...”

Mokuzu, stop.....!

Victory had risen to her face.

“The combination to the lock was 527. I think Yamada Nagisa set it. I don't get why you asked her to be a go-between with another girl. That's right, if Kanajima Shouta knew Yamada Nagisa's feelings, of course, he would have been able to guess the combination. Kanajima Shouta, it's becoming a rumor. The inside of the rabbit pen was covered with the shoe prints of the boy who found it, and he was covered in blood. It'd be bad if the police got involved, wouldn't it?”

“Y-You-.....!”

Mokuzu was smiling hatefully. Her grin became wider, and even though she was thin and frail, she was very loathsome. When I thought Kanajima suddenly gritted his teeth, he raised his long arm, which was built up by playing baseball.

There was a dull sound. Mokuzu fell down without a sound.

Kanajima went on top of Mokuzu, who fell on the ground, gripped the collar of her uniform with his left hand, and shook her violently. He raised his right arm again. He made a fist and two times, three times, four times.....leaving himself to anger, struck Mokuzu's pale, pretty face.

Eiko's thin, shrill scream could be heard in the classroom.

I couldn't move. There was the humiliation, the embarrassment that made me feel like I couldn't come to school anymore, my anger at Mokuzu, but more than anything, I was frozen by my fear of Kanajima, who had suddenly changed. Until now, I never saw Kanajima.....no, anyone being violent like this to someone. Of course I repeatedly saw scenes of cruelty in things like movies and manga, and I heard news about wars in far countries and bizarre incidents that occurred surprisingly close. But this close, like this.....

My teeth chattered.

Mokuzu's black bangs swayed, and I saw that her big eyes were wide open.

She was looking up sadly at empty space and had

lost the strength to resist for some reason. Like a pale, broken doll, Mokuzu let her limbs hang loosely.

I noticed for some reason.

Mokuzu—

seemed like she was waiting for this wave to end.

Instead of resisting and running away, she was waiting until Kanajima would feel satisfied and stopped naturally. Mokuzu knew that violence had an end. And if it didn't end, she saw that she would just die—no, she had given up believing otherwise.

I looked at Kanajima. There was something wrong with the look in his eyes, he put more and more strength into the arm he raised, and it didn't look like he would feel satisfied and stop any time soon. The spell broke. I jumped at Kanajima's back while shouting and tried to pin his arms behind his back, and was surprised at the sheer difference between our strengths. When I understood that I couldn't stop him, while screaming, I went between Kanajima and Mokuzu.

“Stop, stop! Mokuzu will die!”

After I clung to Mokuzu, who was limp, I turned back to Kanajima while shaking. Kanajima, unlike the Kanajima Shouta-kun who I sat next to and got along with, had a look like the Kongou something statue that I saw in a textbook and had a dark red, grotesque face. He tried to swing down the fist he had raised on my head as I was in the way, and when he looked at me, he looked curious, then he slowly lowered his hand.

“Kanajimaa.....”

I started crying.

When Kanajima raised both hands, acting feminine like a girl, he covered his head with his open hands.

Kanajima was crying too. By the low sobbing and the salty liquid that fell from between his fingers, I knew. There was the sound of footsteps, and maybe because someone called for him, the homeroom teacher rushed in. Eiko was saying something to the teacher.

While crying, I said,

“Kanajima..... Why, why?”

U, u..... Only low, heavy sobs came.

“Why did you hit the girl you like? I don't get it. How could you do something like that? You really like Umino Mokuzu. Why.....?”

The teacher roughly made Kanajima stand up, and took him away. Kanajima's shoulders were shaking. A few girls supported Mokuzu and took her to the infirmary. Mokuzu opened her mouth. Something like a pearl fell, and Eiko picked it up. It was a tooth. From Mokuzu's colorless lips, red blood started flowing. Something like hardened blood started coming out from her nose too.

Mokuzu seemed to be in a haze for a while and couldn't speak. It seemed that the inside of her mouth was cut. When Mokuzu, who was sitting on a bed in the infirmary, was told not to talk because it would hurt by the school nurse, it seemed she wanted to talk, and looking up at me, she said,

"I'm not the one who killed the rabbits."

"Yeah....."

"It was Kanajima. Kanajima did it. Kanajima, you see....."

With hatred, she started saying bad things about Kanajima. I just said, "Mokuzu, don't talk." I gripped Mokuzu's pale, shaking hand and waited for the doctor that the school called for.

The doctor finally came, Mokuzu left early, and I was asked to go to the classroom to get her bag. I went in the classroom where the afternoon classes had begun already, and while I was attracting attention, I got her bag, my bag, and after thinking a little, Kanajima's bag, and left the classroom.

I walked through the hallway holding the three bags, and went down the stairs.

—It was at that time that I noticed that there was the smell of something raw.

I sniffed the air and looked around. I noticed that the smell kept following me no matter how much I walked, and then finally, I understood that the source of the smell was a bag I was holding.

It smells like blood.....?

I put down my bag, and although it wasn't good, tried opening Kanajima's bag. There were textbooks and a lunchbox, and change of clothes.

I tried to open Mokuzu's bag and.....

noticed that something white was sticking out.

I wondered whether I should open it.

I understood that that white thing was undoubtedly

a rabbit's ear, so I didn't open the bag any more. When I returned to the nurse's office, maybe because her nervousness disappeared, Mokuzu was fast asleep. I stood at the side of the bed and looked down at my poor, cruel friend's pale, pretty, dreamlike face as she slept. Then, I thought no matter how crazy this girl was or how much of a sugar candy terrorist she was, I couldn't hate her, and I was worried about her.

From the principal's office, where Kanajima was being pressed, there was a call for me as a student who knew what happened, so I took Kanajima's bag and went to the principal's office. The principal, the vice principal, the teacher in charge of our year, and our homeroom teacher were there, and Kanajima was standing at attention.

I was told to say what happened, so saying as little as I could, I just told them that Kanajima said, "The one who killed the rabbits was Umino Mokuzu," Mokuzu said, "It was Kanajima," and it became a fight. Kanajima was hanging his head and looked very small. He didn't look like the same person as the guy who went on top of a girl and beat her like a devil. Kanajima was kicked off the baseball team, and it was decided that he would be suspended for a week. I went out of the principal's office first. With an inappropriate brightness, the homeroom teacher said things like, "Now you can grow out your hair, huh, Kanajima?" and was scolded by the teacher in charge of our year. Even though he was an adult, he couldn't act properly as usual.

I walked through the hallway with heavy steps.

When I went to the nurse's office, I was told to go home first by the school nurse. Thinking that maybe Mokuzu wouldn't come to school for a while, I wrote down my home phone number on a piece of paper and put it near her pillow. I, who unlike the others in the class, didn't have a cell phone, was a no good middle school student who made her friends take her into consideration while calling her house and say, "Is this the Yamada residence? Is Nagisa-chan there?"

The rabbit pen, which functioned as the place where I, who was a raiser from the time I was born, could support my soul for the year and half since I entered middle school, had all the things that had life travel now, and was covered by tarp. Sadness began to assail me, so I shook it off and walked. Going through the school gate, I walked on the unpaved country road with quick steps. The old asphalt was, here and there, broken, raised, and weeds came up from under. While thinking I wish I could live this boldly, I stepped on the weeds lightly. They seemed fine.

Making a loud clunky noise, an old tractor slowly passed me. An old man with white hair that made me think he didn't have to work anymore drove while humming. The recession hit farmers too, and everyone around here was a part-time farmer. Most men in the prime of their lives worked in places like the municipal office and the station, and their grandfathers, grandmothers, and wives took care of the farms.

When I was walking while stepping on the weeds, I

heard the sound of footsteps coming after me from behind. My shoulders shook and I walked faster.

The one who caught up to me called out to me reservedly.

“.....Yamada.”

Not having a choice, I stopped walking. Kanajima was there with a troubled look on his face.

Far off, the siren of the municipal office went off. It was 5:00 PM.

With heavy steps, we walked next to each other.

“Yamada, that thing...about...my birthday. The lock.....”

“.....That's just Mokuzu's guess. I used a random number.”

“I see. ....That's what I thought.”

Kanajima might be stupid. He easily believed me. I was able to go without the one for whom I faintly felt an immature, love-like thing starting right after I got in this school and became a first year, knowing about it, so for the time being, I felt relieved. It was helpful that Kanajima was dull.

Then I was quiet for a while, and finally asked in a low voice.

“.....Why did you do something like that?”

“Don't know,”

Kanajima said coldly.

The dark flame of anger started wavering again.

“Why did I do something like that?”

Kanajima shook his head.

“Umino..... It was Umino's fault. That I did some-

thing like that. She made me do it. She's the bad one. Not me."

Kanajima repeated that by himself. He said the same thing again and again. And then he said,

"From the time we went on the bus, she ignored me when I talked to her....."

It was a dark voice.

The wind blew, and the ears of rice that were a vivid green swayed. The smell of the end of summer that was like dried straw hung in the air. The dry asphalt was dirty with soil and dust and of organic fertilizer. Kanajima and I both walked silently.

Before long, we finally came to a fork in the road, so I was relieved. I didn't know what I should say.

As we parted, Kanajima

"But, I....."

looked at me and spoke.

"think the one behind the what happened to the rabbits was Umino."

".....Mokuzu said it was you."

"Yeah."

With a dark voice, Kanajima said,

"Umino might hate the things you care about. That might be why she took them from you. That's what I think."

"Mokuzu seems like she'd say the same thing."

"Haha. ....I wonder if it'll end with rabbits."

After saying just that, Kanajima lowered his shoulders and walked past.

I tilted my head and looked at his back.

Exactly who killed the rabbits? Was it Umino Mokuzu? Was it Kanajima Shouta?

Then I thought about who would be next if Umino Mokuzu slaughtered the rabbits with the motive he said. Take away what I cared about? .....No matter how I thought about it, the next target would be my brother, Tomohiko.

Then I thought, 'What if the one who slaughtered the rabbits was Kanajima Shouta?' The carefree boy who sat next to me, Kanajima's brutality overwhelmed me just a few hours ago. If Kanajima Shouta was the culprit, the one who would be killed after the rabbits was, no matter how I thought it was—

Umino Mokuzu, undoubtedly.

The night of that day. As always, I made dinner and ate with Tomohiko, did homework in corner of the kitchen and prepared for tomorrow's lessons, and gazed at the TV that was left on without really watching it. My mom came home late from her part-time, so I reheated her dinner and prepared for when my mom would finish taking her bath and come to the dining table. Today's dinner was Shanghai yakisoba that was made by stir frying meat, vegetables, and Chinese noodles mixed with sauce I bought, and morokyu. I don't know what she was trying to do, but my mom came out with a hero's transformation pose and happily

“When I think about it, being able to do housework this much at the age of thirteen, you're mature.”

said something late. I became so embarrassed it surprised even me and yelled, "Ehh!?" At that time, the phone rang. My mom stopped making the transformation pose, reached for the receiver, and said,

"Yes yes, this is Yamada....."

Then she groaned once. She looked at me with a surprised look, and while being flustered, said,

"She is; I will give it to her now."

She held the receiver out to me. And then she spoke with a small voice that was like she was excited.

"She said she was Umino. A girl. A girl. Could it be the 'In the morning glow, I was looking at~.....'s Umino Masachika's daughter? You're close to her, right? That's amazing. Umino-san, Umino-san."

"Mom, you're annoying. ....Hello? Mokuzu?"

On the other side of the phone, Mokuzu was moaning.

'.....She didn't have to sing it!'

"Ah, you heard?"

'I did!'

In a lonely-sounding voice, Umino Mokuzu said, 'Let's meet, Yamada Nagisa. The storm's close,' so even while getting angry about the talk of the storm, I put my change purse in my pocket, put on my sneakers, and went outside. The meeting place was the coast for some reason. I took out the mountain bike Oniichan used to use before, put air in the tires because they didn't have enough, and then pedaled to the coast. It would take a long time to go by foot, but

it was faster than I expected by bicycle.

The coast was dark, and in the trash that washed ashore were mixed things like empty cans with the brand name written in Korean that seemed to have come from the Korean peninsula, the whole place smelled like a seashore, and no one was there. When I was looking around, on top of a pale tetrapod that felt like it was way above was standing Umino Mokuzu with exquisite balance, and was swaying her arms dangerously.

“Mokuzu.....?”

When I called in a small voice, Umino Mokuzu turned toward me.

On Mokuzu's face, which dimly appeared in the moonlight, being able to be seen and hiding behind her swaying bangs, were scattered dark red bruises. Kanajima Shouta did it. Kanajima Shouta, who was supposed to be carefree, supposed to be a boy with a buzz cut in the baseball team, and supposed to be a normal person.

Like she was bored, Mokuzu said,

“Noo one's here!”

“Of course! Summer's going to end, and it's night.”

“.....Hehe.”

Mokuzu laughed like a child. Then without any logical connection, when she suddenly jumped off the tetrapod, she dropped headfirst into the dark, night sea. The sight of Umino Mokuzu falling into the ocean, which was so dark the boundary between it and the darkness couldn't be told, looked like a

sudden suicide, so I involuntarily shouted, “Ah.” Mokuzu was wearing a blackish dress that had a simple but lovely design. The hem of the skirt that went down to her knees and spread out lightly released the air it was filled with, and sank.

Mokuzu went under the water. I sat on the sand and while thinking what to do with this friend, waited for Mokuzu to surface. Then one minute, two minutes, three minutes.....probably, four minutes passed.....? The sight of Mokuzu's black hem spreading like a nightmare as it was still sunk in the dark sea made me stand up suddenly.

“Mo-Mo-Mokuzu?”

.....She might have died.

I took off my sneakers in a hurry, put down my change purse, took off my watch, took a deep breath, and then ran into the sea.

It became more and more deep, and the water went to my knees, my waist, my chest.....then finally, my body sunk into the sea. First, the sea water enveloped my body pleasantly, after that, I felt a little cold, I floated, and then my hands found something like Mokuzu. I didn't know if it was Mokuzu's waist or head, but it moved in the sea like she was surprised. I rose to the surface and gasped for air. In the water in front of me, Mokuzu's black hair or the hem of her skirt swayed like seaweed. Small bubbles rose up.

After a while, Mokuzu came up while smiling.

“Fuu, it feels good doesn't it, Yamada Nagisa?”

“.....I thought you died!”

“Me? In the sea?”

Mokuzu grinned like she heard an interesting joke.

“Even though I'm a mermaid?”

“That was right.”

I sighed.

While floating and swimming away from Mokuzu, I said,

“But, you were in the water for a long time.”

“I'm a mermaid. Even though I look like a human, I can still hold my breath.”

Saying that, Mokuzu smiled.

For a while, Mokuzu and I floated in the night sea like mermaids, and told lies and replied that that was a lie. And then when we became exhausted and came out of the sea, we put just our feet on the sand and played in the water. My T-shirt and jeans were wet and had become heavy. Mokuzu's black dress was also dripping wet and clung to her thin body. Mokuzu lent me a hand towel. It was the brand-name towel that Eiko said cost five thousand yen. I borrowed it and wiped my face and hair.

Mokuzu took the hem of her skirt and wrung it tightly.

Her pale, overly thin, frail legs could be seen up to her thighs.

There, marks of blows, big and small, old and new, were mixed together and scattered. And at her chest, on places that couldn't be seen when she was wearing her uniform, marks of scratches and contusions were scattered.

Illuminated by the moonlight—  
on the pale skin that was almost thin enough to see  
through, rose—

so frightening they were almost like lies, marks of  
violence.

I was drawn by those marks and couldn't look  
away. Mokuzu, who was wringing her skirt, noticed  
that and looked at me intently.

“Mokuzu.....”

“These aren't injuries,”

Mokuzu suddenly said quickly.

“Eh?”

“They aren't injuries.”

“Then, what?”

The moonlight fell palely and illuminated Mokuzu's  
face, her wet hair, and the dark red scars on her chest.  
With a desperate expression, Mokuzu lied to me again.

“It's pollution.”

The sea of the night sunk blackly, and sometimes  
the surface was disturbed by the wind of the end of  
summer. It was quiet. I looked at Mokuzu's face and  
waited, even while wondering what she would say  
next. I felt disgust, a strange attraction, a feeling of  
irritation, and.....many things at the same time at the  
lies she told, and couldn't do anything. It felt hard to  
breathe.

“Pollu...tion.....?”

“Yeah.”

Mokuzu nodded. She twisted up a tissue, stuck it in

her left ear, and while cleaning it for some reason, continued talking quickly.

“You see, mermaids always live the same way. They've repeated the same things from hundreds of years ago, but human civilization keeps changing, right? Right now, seas are being polluted by modernization. The waste liquid that's discharged from factories, sewage, and trash. Ships that sank also spill oil and makes the surrounding area pitch black. That's why all mermaids now are troubled with skin disease. Most of the ones who are born have allergies, and it's hard. Me too. I grew in a polluted sea, and I've been like this from before.”

“They look like blows.”

“That they look like that is the silliness of humans.”

Mokuzu smiled satisfactorily.

“This, you see, is the poison that accumulated from when I was a baby coming out of the body in a way that makes it look like a blow. They're toxins. Mermaid skin breaks easily.”

“I see. So that's how it is.....”

When I nodded, having no choice, for some reason, Mokuzu looked a little hurt at me, who pretended to be convinced.

We got out of the water, I walked while pulling along Tomohiko's bicycle, and Mokuzu strolled beside it. The way back was long. Mount Nina sunk blackly and towered against the night sky.

When we finally got near my house, Mokuzu said, “I'll rest for around three days, then go to school

again,” and went back. At the branch in the road, I waved my hand and tried to go home. And then I noticed that I still had her hand towel, and it looked like it cost five thousand yen, so I thought I had to give it back. I turned back, went on the bicycle, and went after Mokuzu.

The roads were newly paved, the houses that extended on both sides of it were mansions, and I felt a strange timidity. Because I only came once, I got a little lost. Because of that, I couldn't see Mokuzu on the road anymore, and thought she went home already. I remembered the way, somehow found the white, square Umino house, and stood in front of it.

But it's late at night..... I hesitated ringing the doorbell, thought I should just give it back to her the next time I met her, and tried to go back.

I heard a thin scream.

I turned back.

It was a voice I heard from this white, extravagant house whose doorbell I hesitated to ring. I knew that it was Mokuzu's voice. Mokuzu, again and again, was crying out.

“I'm sorry! I'm sorry!”

Following that, there were cries of 'I won't do it anymore,' and 'I'm sorry,' and 'Dad.' There was the something falling on the floor, a succession of dull sounds, and a thin cry. I stood still in a daze. I remembered what Mokuzu said.

<I really love my dad.>

The scream continued.

<Love is despair, isn't it?>

An old man from the neighborhood slowly passed by my side as I stood still. When the old man, who was walking with his head hung while holding a pack of cigarettes with one hand, noticed me, he stopped, and then looked up at the white house.

He glanced at me as I looked like I was about to cry like he sympathized, and walked past.

I couldn't do anything, and gripping the hand towel, trudged home. My clothes, which had been wet, started to dry little by little. When I returned home, my mom was talking with someone on the phone. She was hunching her back and concentrating on the conversation, and was murmuring things like 'My,' and 'Oh no.' After I took a shower and came out unsteadily from the bathroom, my mom hung up and faced me.

“—Is the Umino girl all right?”

was the first thing my mom said. It was a dark tone that sounded like she was blaming me. I asked, “Huh?”

My mom's mood was different from the frivolous one she had before I went out, and she had a somewhat serious expression.

“It's becoming a rumor in the neighborhood. That that girl might be killed by her father even now.”

Losing strength, I sat down. Even if she told me that, I didn't know what to do. I was thirteen years old, a middle school student, Mokuzu's friend, and in charge of raising things: Yamada Nagisa. What was I

supposed to do?

Could I do something for Mokuzu?

I already knew that my misfortune was so much of a common and ordinary and often-found poverty that it couldn't be compared to Mokuzu's. I recognized that too. But my ordinary misfortune and Mokuzu's Mokuzu-like, unique misfortune had one point in common. We were thirteen years old, we were minors, and we were middle school students who were taking compulsory education. We still didn't have the power to cut through fate. We had to be raised by our parents, and children couldn't pick their parents. I pretended that I'd become an adult a step or two ahead of everyone under my parent and did housework and became my brother's guardian and even if it was only in my heart, complained that I couldn't do it anymore. Mokuzu might go somewhere else if she could too. If she became an adult and became free. But thirteen year olds couldn't go anywhere.

“When he was in Tokyo, it seems he was reported to a place like a center for child abuse. That might be why he came back here. Though I think the same thing will happen soon here too.....”

My mom made a dark expression and rested her chin on her hands on top of the table. While wiping my hair with bath towel and being silent, I looked at the wall.

“Did you know that that girl has a handicap ID?”

“.....Wha?”

“I thought you knew. See, she drags her leg when

she walks, right? That's famous because it stands out. She was treated very violently when she was a baby, so something happened to her hip joint. That's why that girl can't walk properly, and she can't open up her legs. She doesn't take P.E., right?"

My mom talked while making a pose that involved stretching her legs. I looked at her do that vacantly, and then when I remembered when I went out with Mokuzu and Kanajima.....and Mokuzu showed the driver something like an ID.

Mokuzu was trying to get off the bus while dragging her leg then too, and the driver looked shocked at the ID that refined pretty girl, Mokuzu, showed him, and when he glared at Kanajima and me, who were waiting without doing anything, yelled,

<You're her friends, aren't you!? Help her out!>

I bit my lip.

To no one in part in particular, I wanted to explain.

But I didn't know Mokuzu was handicapped. I thought she was doing it on purpose. It's hard to find things that aren't lies from a sea of lies. I kept thinking Mokuzu was just doing that to get people's attention.....

"It isn't a handicap she was born with, but one she got afterward,"

my mom murmured.

And then, looking curiously at me, whose eyes were teary, pointed at her left ear.

"And, she can't hear with one of her ears."

"Really.....?"

“They say her eardrum was broken and she became unable to hear. That's why she won't respond even if you call out to her from her left. You know Eiko-chan. I just heard from her mom. She said Eiko-chan heard the rumor and tried it out. With her other friends. That she wouldn't turn no matter what if it was from her left. That she wouldn't notice no matter what you said. And it seems Eiko-chan said some terrible things.”

“.....”

I stood up to put the bath towel in the washing machine.

I remembered all of the times I got angry at Mokuzu.

And then I remembered the time Kanajima was angry that she ignored him.

The time I told her to stop talking about ships capsizing. The time Kanajima talked to her in the bus. They were all times when we spoke to her on her left side. All of the times I was angry that she pretended she couldn't hear things that weren't convenient for her and thought she was unfairly weighed down on me. I didn't know she couldn't hear.

Mokuzu, always without fail, came after me while dragging her leg, but because she couldn't catch up, threw water bottles at me and made me stop. And then when she dragged her leg again and finally caught up, she secured my left side and, again, continued walking while her body swayed.

She always faced the ear she could hear with at me.

In front of the washing machine, I let go of the bath

towel, and then, like Kanajima that time, raised my hands and covered my face. Drip drip drip..... Large tears fell. I was taken in by Mokuzu. She was pitiable, irritating, pretty, dirty.....

While still covering my face with my hands, I stuck my head in the washing machine and cried quietly. Mokuzu. Mokuzu. Into unreliable guns with little force, Mokuzu loaded sugar candy bullets, I loaded live rounds, and we kept shooting, but it didn't look like we could take anything down.

Children were all soldiers, and this world was a game of survival. And.

What would happen to Mokuzu.....?

The next day and the next next day, Mokuzu didn't come to school. It became October, and we wore winter uniforms. The thick and fluffy blazer was still a little hot. Kanajima was still suspended, so the only one involved in that incident in the class was me. I was surrounded by the other girls and asked various things, but I only dodged the questions and didn't say anything. It seemed everyone felt dissatisfied with me, and Eiko, as their representative, said,

“You have a duty to explain, don't you?”

“NN-No.”

“You~ do~!”

The social world was a pretty scary place.

On the next next day, after school, I went to the shopping district to get a new curry pan. The shopping district with an arcade street downtown in front of the

station. The old, plastic ceiling was very high, and because it got in the way of the sunlight, it was always dim and dusty. I found the cheapest aluminum in a store, decided to buy it, and bargained a little. When I held the pan, went out of the store, and walked out into the shopping arcade, in front of me, Umino Masachika was walking.

He was white like he had lost color, his hair was silky, his legs were long, and as usual, he had a neat appearance that made people think, 'Ehh, he's the father of a middle school student?' He was wearing an aloha shirt that was a little flashy, and a watch that seemed expensive but wasn't nouveau-riche and had good sense. It was a flashy and fresh look that didn't match the dim shopping arcade. When Umino Masachika noticed that a middle school girl who was holding a huge pot was glaring at him, he widened his eyes for a moment like he was surprised. They were big eyes that looked a lot like Mokuzu's.

"Will Umino-san.....come to school tomorrow?"

When I asked that with a low voice, Umino Masachika, who had been trying to walk away, stopped. He looked at my face, checked my uniform and school badge, and then looked at the pot and said,

".....Are you her classmate?"

"Yes."

"I see. ....But, you aren't her friend, right?"

Umino Masachika, who looked like a fine young man, suddenly changed the moment he started talking about his daughter, and made a mean face. He snorted

like he was making fun of her and said,

“She doesn't have any friends, does she? Because she's stupid. Stupid people can't make friends. She was stupid from when she was born. Like her mother. Only her face is good. Her intelligence is.....”

“I'm her friend!”

A really unpleasant feeling rose. I was never despised this much by anyone in my family. Of course there were a lot things that dissatisfied me about my mom and my brother, but I never talked this bitterly about them. What I thought was family and the bonds in the Umino family were completely different.

I hugged the pot. The people who were walking in the shopping district noticed that the celebrity Umino Masachika and a middle school girl who was holding a pot were glaring at each other, and started glancing at us.

“Why do you talk so badly about your child?”

“I don't want to say it either. But there's really nothing I can do about her. I want her to be in my shoes. It's embarrassing.”

“But I don't think it's okay to use violence.”

“.....Violence?”

“It's become a rumor in the town. Mokuzu is covered with bruises, she can't hear out of one of her ears, she can't walk properly, and there are screams from her house. That that's why you came to here from Tokyo.....”

“Rumor?”

Maybe because Umino Masachika felt the gazes



from the surroundings, he softened his words. He smiled like he was dealing with a troubling child and said,

“It's a rumor, right? Even if my daughter has bruises, can you prove that I did it? Even if there are screams from my house, it isn't like you saw me doing anything, is it? Don't you know? That girl's an unbelievable liar. It's really unbelievable. She lies ceaselessly. She says that at school, she's popular. I know that she's lying, though. It's beyond help, isn't it? If you believe Mokuzu's lies and say things like that, I won't hold back even though you're a kid. Slander can be fatal in the business I'm in. Do you understand?”

Umino Masachika looked down at the pot I was holding.

“If it becomes a lawsuit and you lose, it'll cost a lot of money. Can your parents pay for it?”

“Don't hit Mokuzu.”

To prove that I wasn't intimidated by that threat, I said that with a loud voice. My soul wouldn't bend the truth because of money.

Umino Masachika tsked with his tongue. Then he swung his leg up and kicked the pot I just bought. The pot became dented, went away from my hands, and fell on the stone paving of the shopping district.

I stood still where I was.

∴

I'm walking.

The slope of Mount Nina is becoming steep.

Soon, I'll reach that place.

Early in the morning of October fourth—

The morning mist is on the moss and tries to make Tomohiko and me lose our footing. When I slip and almost fall, Tomohiko supports me. Tomohiko also slips sometimes. The scenery becomes more and more open, and the sea that shines white by the morning sun far away is bright.

From the vivid leaves of the trees, morning mist falls sometimes. On my face and my shoulders, on my neck, a few drops.....

“What should I do?”

I murmur.

What should I do?

If what I'm looking for is really at that place, what should I do.....?

“Hey, Tomohiko.....”

With a voice that's close to crying, I moan.

“What should I do, Tomohiko.....?”

Ahh.

“Tomohiko,

Last night, Mokuzu told me.....”

“That her life was all a lie.

That because it was a lie, it was fine.”

The day after the day Umino Masachika kicked the pot and the pot got dented and flew and I became enraged in the middle of the shopping district. In other words, it was October 3, a Saturday, and on that day, Mokuzu finally came to school. Having said that, she was late and came in the classroom with her pale face around the end of third period, and when I went near her and said to her that most of the classes were over, Mokuzu said, “.....Tahaha.”

Eiko, who passed by, said

“This girl came to meet Nagisa.”

She stood on Mokuzu's left side and said that hatefully. Eiko was angry. I noticed that Eiko, who was obliging and liked rumors and was always waiting for surprises or in other words special things, thought that the daughter of the performer who suddenly transferred, Mokuzu, or in other words a surprise was special, and that the fact that that Mokuzu didn't even notice her and was for some reason sticking to the unsociable Yamada Nagisa or in other words me didn't sit well with her. I'd become unable to think of the things that occurred around Mokuzu as being unrelated to me and not being live rounds, so when Eiko opened her mouth again, I said,

“.....Eiko, is it fun saying whatever you want on her left?”

Eiko closed her mouth.

And with a cold look that I, who was supposed to be relatively close to her, a classmate she got along

with, hadn't even seen until now, she glared at me. With that careless statement, I made the social world my enemy. I noticed that, but I didn't really care anymore. I was already covered with sugar, I was somewhat desperate, and everything I got and saw was sticky and made me unable to tolerate.

Fourth period ended with an unrestful mood, and homeroom ended too. For the whole time, the girls didn't talk to me. Maybe Eiko's message had been passed, or it was agreed upon silently. I didn't know, but anyway, everyone surrounded me at a distance. The air was totally different from the way it was in the morning. When I got up, Eiko shouldered me, and I staggered at the impact and sat again. I looked tiredly at Eiko, who walked away while pretending nothing happened. When I looked around the classroom, the girls who were watching silently all looked away.

It was the unrestful mood that came up right before the start of a strange festival.

I kind of didn't care anymore. It felt like that wasn't a live round either. I stood up again. And I didn't know what kind of declaration of intention it was, but I went to the seat in the corner. Then I said,

“Let's go back together.”

to Mokuzu.

At that time, Mokuzu was raising her chin, and glug glug glug glug.....drinking mineral water, but she became surprised at my words, reversed the direction of the water, and spurted water out like a little fountain. And then she took the water bottle away

from her mouth and said,

“.....Okay.”

When we nodded, the homeroom teacher who was supposed to have gone out of the classroom returned and said,

“Hey, Yamada, come to the staff room for a bit.”

“.....Ehh~!?”

“It'll be over quickly, it'll be over quickly.”

This frivolous homeroom teacher who became flustered when students made dissatisfied expressions repeated, “Quickly, quickly.” I said, “It seems like it'll be quick, so wait,” to Mokuzu and went to the staff room.

The hallway after school was full of students who were coming and going. As we got near the staff room, it became more silent. While thinking how I didn't want to go, I went to the staff room. Several teachers were sitting and working. The branch of a tree swayed outside.

The homeroom teacher sat in his seat while wiping his sweat and made me stand in front of him. Then he said,

“It's about your future course.”

“I see.”

“You took the future course survey, right? On that, you wrote SDF. Do you like weapons? I like kung fu better. I went off topic. I mean, Yamada,”

The teacher wiped his sweat again. K-Kung fu?

“Is that after graduating high school? Or will you go into a military university and become an officer

cadet beauty? Your grades are, well, not bad, though it isn't like they're extremely good. They're average, so.....”

“No, um, I'm not going to go to high school.”

“You have to!”

The teacher suddenly yelled. I became surprised and closed my mouth. After that, the teacher said various things like how life would be way easier if I graduated from high school, that I should work part time and go to school part time. After saying all of that, he slowly said, “Oh yeah, oh yeah,” and took out documents that seemed to have information on my family and the conditions I was in written on it.

And then with a stern look, he raised his head.

“Your father passed away, and now you only have a mother, right? What about your brother?”

“My brother's an aristocrat.”

“.....Hm?”

Slowly, carefully, I told him about my brother. The homeroom teacher's face became more and more stern. He made a scary face like he was another person, and started glaring at the of the desk.

Then he spoke with a low voice.

“Yamada.....”

“Yes?”

“You know, my younger brother is that too.”

“That?”

“Hi, hi, hi.....hikikomori?”

With a weird look that seemed like he was very hurt, very angry, my teacher raised his head. Sudden-

ly, I realized that this adult used to be a child somewhere, but that was hard to believe and didn't sink in.

The teacher then, speaking quickly, talked about things it seemed he saw in various things like books and discussions on TV. After talking about things like the cause and modern illnesses and how to fix it, the teacher said,

“But I think before talk of modern illnesses.....this is my opinion, and it ain't like some famous professor from somewhere said it, but I think it's, probably, the mother's fault. My mother lets a healthy, young man idle about the house without working, and if she doesn't cook meals from him and bring them to him, he'll starve. If you're starving, you'll move, right? Because you're hungry. If you get hungry, it's troubling. And then he'll probably go out and rob a convenience store or get a part time job or go on some trip. Because he's hungry. If you don't have money, you can't live. Right, you need what you, Yamada, call live rounds. I think my mother wants someone near her. Not me, who became independent, became a civil servant, has a secure future, and doesn't deal with his parents that much, but the hikikomori second son who can't do anything without his mother and is optimal for spoiling. ....Then, why doesn't she just get a cat? Right?”

The teacher started getting excited, and his voice started getting louder. He noticed that, became red, and said,

“.....Sorry, sorry. But, that's what I think. Because the parents haven't become independent, they spoil their children and make them unable to do anything. There are twisted parents who need a child who can't do anything and stay at home all day. But when I heard your story.....you're like my mom. Am I wrong? You're supporting your brother. You cook for him and make it so he doesn't starve. So he doesn't think about working, about shooting live rounds by himself.”

I bit my lip.

He didn't know anything.....!

Nothing about the hardship we've faced for years.....

“If your brother becomes able to shoot live rounds, you'll be troubled. That's why.....”

“It isn't like I'm doing it because I want to! It can't be helped!”

“Go to high school. The one who should work is your brother. He is, no matter what you say, a goddamn, lazy ass aristocrat,”

the teacher said clearly. With a look that seemed he wouldn't give an inch, he repeated, “Go to high school.” It was a little different from how he couldn't act appropriately, and he had an expression like he got hold of something and wouldn't let go. I rebelled.

“.....I don't want to.”

“Let's include your mother and talk about this. I can go to your house. I'll confront your brother.”

“You.....”

“Hikikomoris have a way with words with their



families. They're tyrants in their family. But that stronghold is weak. They can't talk properly to other people and can't even look them in the eye sometimes. You'll understand too. That what your brother needs is another person. And that what you need is peace of mind."

"Peace of mind.....?"

"What children need is peace of mind. That's what I think. But in many households, chronically, that is insufficient. Not just you."

I glared at the teacher and took two, three steps back. He said, "Think about it," I muttered, "I don't want to," and went out of the staff room.

"Tonight, I'm going to make a home visit. Tell your mother!"

"Don't come!"

I yelled.

And I ran through the hallway.

When I went into the classroom angrily, all my classmates had gone home, and by the window, Mokuzu was resting her chin on her hands listlessly. When she noticed me coming in, Mokuzu pointed at the clock on the wall and said,

"You're late~"

"Sorry. The teacher wouldn't shut up."

"What did he say?"

I tilted my head and said,

"He said children need peace of mind or something."

“Ehh, I don't really get it.”

“Me neither.”

Mokuzu stood up and walked toward me. The sky that began to become cloudy beyond Mokuzu became dyed an ominous grey and spread. When I was staring at that, Mokuzu said in a troubled voice,

“If we don't go soon, the storm will come.”

With her voice, I remembered that today was October 3, the day Mokuzu insisted that the 'storm that wouldn't come up in the weather forecast' would come.

“This morning, when I looked at the weather report, it said it would be sunny.”

“.....The storm will come.”

Mokuzu repeated happily.

“The storm will come.”

When I murmured, “Yeah, yeah,” took my bag, and turned around to get out of the classroom.....

The door opened.

The one who was standing there was Kanajima Shouta. He was in his uniform, wasn't carrying anything, and when he noticed us, yelled, 'Ah.' Mokuzu and I were also surprised and looked fixedly at Kanajima's face.

“Kanajima..... Aren't you still suspended?”

“Y-Yeah. I forgot something, so I was troubled. I came to get it. Um.....I thought no one would be here anymore.”

Kanajima's eyes looked down, and he faced down

so his eyes wouldn't meet Mokuzu's or mine. But it seemed worried him, so while going to his seat jerkily, he raised his gaze and looked at Mokuzu.

Then he stood still.

Ahh.... He moaned.

“Those...injuries.....”

On Mokuzu's face, there were bruises that had become dark red. It was pollution. Kanajima bit his lip tightly and glared at Mokuzu. It looked like he was repeating, 'Mokuzu made me hit her,' in his mind.

But the moment Mokuzu lowered her eyes, Kanajima said,

“.....Sorry.”

in a low voice.

I stood still. Kanajima's voice seemed completely different from the child-like voice with which he insisted that it was Mokuzu's fault. It had an adult's presence and the aura of a secret.

Mokuzu frowned sulkily and was quiet. Kanajima was looking at Mokuzu. I suddenly realized that I didn't have a place in the classroom. Right now, in this classroom under the cloudy sky, there were only Mokuzu and Kanajima. It seemed like I had suddenly become transparent.

“Sorry,”

Kanajima said again.

Mokuzu was quiet. She moved her body like she was sulky, and finally spoke.

“.....I won't forgive you.”

“Sorry.”

"I'll never forgive you."

"I-I....."

"Because I'd never been hit by anyone but my dad!"

Mokuzu raised her head.

It was an intense expression. Kanajima stood still in a daze. It looked like he was fascinated and also like he had frozen. Mokuzu was glaring at Kanajima. She went near Kanajima while her body swayed.

"Umino, that leg....."

Kanajima murmured like he was frightened.

"Is it true that you're handicapped?"

".....That's right."

"Is it true that your dad did it?"

"What if he did?"

"I heard you can't open your legs....."

"I can't. After all, it's locked."

The pretty girl who was polluted, Umino Mokuzu, grinned with a look more evil than I'd ever seen before, and stood in front of her prey, Kanajima Shouta. Like he was entranced, Kanajima murmured, "So it's.....locked." Mokuzu lifted her chin up and smiled. And then she pushed Kanajima's body. Kanajima fell onto the floor of the classroom. His slow attempt to get up was stopped by Mokuzu when she went on top of him. With her pale, thin hands, she tore the shirt of Kanajima's uniform off, roughly unbuttoned it, and began making him naked. I was just afraid, surprised, and just whispered, "Mo-Mokuzu?" Kanajima's sunburned, glossy, healthy body that was long unlike Mokuzu's appeared. When

Mokuzu stood up, she jumped to the closet where the cleaning implements were stored, grabbed a mop, came back, and then suddenly, hit Kanajima Shouta's back.

“U.....-!”

Kanajima groaned. On the floor, he had widened his eyes in surprise and was looking up at Mokuzu. Umino Mokuzu, who was gripping the mop with a frightening expression. Her pale, beautiful face was covered with bruises, and her eyes were shining. For a moment, Kanajima Shouta made a curious expression, and then he gently reached out his hand, and with an innocence like an elementary school student who was pulling a prank, gripped the hem of Umino Mokuzu's skirt, and lifted it up.

Pale, thin, kneecaps.

Thighs.

White underwear.

A flat stomach and a small belly button.

What were scattered among them were new and old marks of blows. The skin disease of mermaids that she said was caused by toxins coming out.

“It's true. You're covered with bruises. Umino..... you're dirty.”

“You should become dirty too!”

When Mokuzu raised the mop, she hit Kanajima Shouta's back again and again. Whack, whack. Kanajima Shouta shrank like it hurt and cried out a little. But it seemed he didn't feel like resisting against Mokuzu, and just said, “Oww!” and “U-.....!”

The mop was raised up.

On Kanajima's shiny, sunburned back started rising vivid bruises.

—At the sight of the boy I liked who was being polluted by Mokuzu, Kanajima Shouta, I just stood still and shook. Mokuzu hiccuped and started sobbing. Tears spilled and fell from her pale cheek to the ground. When he noticed that, Kanajima Shouta crawled on the ground while opening his mouth like an idiot, fell at Mokuzu's knees, and received the tears that fell. Inside Kanajima's mouth, to his jaw, on top of his nose.....tears fell.

“I-I-I won't forgive you!”

“Sorry.....”

“I won't forgive you!”

“Sorry.....”

“I-I.....”

Mokuzu swung the mop up several times while crying. It was intense violence. I didn't know that such a thin, frail girl could have this much strength. At the thing that I never saw or imagined before, didn't even know existed, that was taking place in front of my eyes, I was scared, disgusted, and just shook. This was something I didn't know yet. It was something Umino Mokuzu and Kanajima Shouta knew before me. Mokuzu's face, which was distorted with anger was raw and didn't look like the face of a thirteen year old middle school girl. On the face of Kanajima was a curious, ecstatic look which I had never seen on a person's face before. Kanajima seemed like he felt

good. But he seemed like he was in pain. The hatred of Mokuzu, who was watching him, increased. I remembered that Mokuzu was a girl who couldn't tell the difference between expressions of love and hate. Did Mokuzu do things like this even to people she cared about? Did it feel good to the people she cared about? Or was it unpleasant?

The mop was swung up and down.

Kanajima moaned sweetly.

The mop was the first live round Mokuzu shot. Mokuzu was a girl who shot this kind of live round with this kind of face to boys.

Several vivid proofs of pollution rose up to Kanajima's back, and Kanajima finally became completely exhausted and stopped moving. When Mokuzu threw the mop to the ground, she sat down where she was.

She looked up at the ceiling, held her head with both hands, and.....

Started crying with a loud voice.

The sky that was grey outside the window became frighteningly dark, and from the sky that was dark enough to overthrow the weather report, rain started to fall. Kanajima got up abruptly and while covered with disgrace and confusion and lost excitement found his shirt and roughly put it on, and without even looking at Mokuzu or me, ran away hurriedly. I just held my head in my hands while leaning on a locker in the corner of the classroom, and was looking

away from Kanajima as he ran away.

My small, first love ended today. Because before me, Kanajima went through a really weird road and became an adult or a pervert or anyway something different from me. Goodbye, boy in the baseball team who sat next to me. I pulled myself together and slowly went near Mokuzu.

I went near Mokuzu, who was sitting on the floor and kept crying loudly, and gave her the towel I had kept. Mokuzu didn't react, so I put it against her face, wiped her tears, and made her blow her nose.

Timidly, I sat next to Mokuzu, who was back to being like a child and was at a loss. The window rattled. When I thought several big drops of rain fell, it suddenly began raining heavily. It was raining so heavily I thought the windows might break. The wind blew with a frightening noise and shook the school building. Mokuzu suddenly spoke.

"This life isn't real."

"Eh-.....?"

"I'm sure it's all someone's lie. That's why it's fine. I'm sure it's all a bad lie."

Mokuzu looked intently at my face.

The outside of the window was stormy like it was another world. Like we became alone in the world, only the inside of the classroom was quiet, safe, dim, and.....

I gently reached out my hands. Mokuzu's head shook like she was waiting for that, and she fell toward me. Mokuzu's body, which I held in my arms,

was thin, exhausted, frail, and shaking.

I gently stroked her head. Mokuzu sniffed.

“Hey, Yamada Nagisa.”

“What.....?”

“What children need is peace of mind...is what the teacher said, right?”

“Yeah.”

“But, I don't get what peace of mind means.”

“Right..... I don't know either. I don't know if you can become happy if you get peace of mind either.”

“Yeah..... But, one day.”

Mokuzu pressed her face against my chest and sniffed it like a kitten searching for her mother's smell. I felt her hot sigh pass through the shirt of my uniform.

“But, one day, I'll go to another place. A place that isn't here. I'd like a place where I can sleep as much as I want. Deep in the bottom of the sea. I'll just sway in the waves and doze, and once every ten years, I'll just lay eggs, and I won't do anything else.....”

“The world of mermaids?”

“Yeah. In the polluted sea, I'll doze as much as I want, just do that, and.....”

The storm outside the window became terrible. Even though when I looked at the time, it was still around the time it would become evening, the sky was pitch-dark and the large raindrops fell continuously. The trees in the schoolyard were swaying like they might break at any moment.

Mokuzu and I leaned against the windowpane and looked up at the dark sky in a daze.



When this storm ended, Mokuzu would have to go back to the home where her crazy father was, and I'd have to go back to the home where my homeroom teacher was going to come to defeat an aristocrat. And this place called school where I had to come back next week was a dark social world that adults didn't know. Once a dark festival started, it was obvious that I'd go through such a hard time that I'd want to die.

I suddenly spoke to Mokuzu.

"Let's run away."

For a moment, Mokuzu twitched.

When I looked at her, she was grinning. It was her usual face. Her bruise-covered, pale face and a weird smile.

"Okay. If you want to run away, I'll go with you."

—The storm shook the school building with an intensity that was like someone exploded Mokuzu's delusion, it dyed the sky with darkness, and didn't lessen until night. Mokuzu and I stood in a daze in the classroom and waited until the rain would become light enough for us to go outside. When it became seven at night, the big storm finally passed. Mermaids from the whole world came back to the Sea of Japan and should have been waiting to lay eggs. Mokuzu and I held hands and went out of the classroom. Running through the dark hallway, we went down the stairs and went out to the muddy schoolyard.

The dark sky led the rainclouds away with great force. A pretty ultramarine night sky appeared. While

Mokuzu and I walked the country road we always did, the muddiness disappeared as we went away from school, and finally, I noticed that, as if it hadn't rained, the road was dry. It seemed like the storm covered our school and shook it and left. We walked on the dried road.

"We have to bring stuff with us."

"You're right, Yamada Nagisa. But what do you plan on bringing?"

"M-My wallet.....? Also, mhh.....like a dryer."

Hearing my answer, Umino Mokuzu lifted her chin and said, "Tahaha." In front of the public housing facility, when we went in front of the entrance to my home, I said, "I'll be done quickly, so wait here." Mokuzu nodded silently. When I went in by myself, I started putting things like clothes and a dryer and the shampoo I liked into a bag. The fusuma opened without a sound, and when I noticed a presence and turned around, Tomohiko was watching me fixedly.

"Nagisa.....are you going to go somewhere?"

"I-I'm going to run away."

When I said that, Tomohiko twisted his face a little.

"I see. Hmm..... I want to go somewhere too."

After murmuring just that, Tomohiko closed the fusuma violently. There was a loud sound and I jumped like my heart had been grabbed. Then after I grabbed my shoes, I went out. I wasn't going to come back anymore. I wasn't going to cook anymore. I wasn't going to help Mom either. I didn't have even one live round left anymore.

I ran out of the entrance. No one was there. “.....Mokuzu?” I called out fearfully. There was no response.

The wind blew. There was the smell of night. The wet asphalt shined. With the wind, drops of water fell from the power line and wet my face.

“Mokuzu—!”

“.....Hehehe.”

Mokuzu came out and looked happily at me, who was about to cry. While grinning, she looked in my bag.

“Yamada Nagisa, what did you bring?”

“Clothes, a dryer, a lead pencil, and soap.....”

“Hmm? That's a weird choice.”

After that, we held hands again and headed to the mansion area where Umino Mokuzu's house was.

Mokuzu's white house was empty and didn't seem like it had anyone in it. Mokuzu whispered, “Wait here,” and headed to the entranceway by herself. I realized that the place I was standing right now was where I stood with Kanajima Shouta and was tricked by Mokuzu's illusion. I stared without thinking and looked fixedly at Mokuzu, who was heading toward the door. This time, the siren didn't go off, Mokuzu didn't stop, and when she opened the door and went inside, she turned back and waved her hand a little. She smiled innocently. It was a smile like she was really having fun, like she was really happy, and I realized that this was the first time I saw her really

smiling and not grinning.

The smile went away little by little as the door closed. I stood there, and dreamed of the far place where I would go to with Mokuzu. That place wouldn't be here. Mokuzu and I would both be free. That's right, that was there. Mokuzu and I both didn't know about it, and we didn't know if we needed it either. That.....

Peace of mind was there.

Then thirty minutes passed and an hour passed, but Umino Mokuzu didn't come out at all. When two hours finally passed and I was about to cry, the door of the entranceway opened silently. "Mokuzu.....!" I almost called out, but closed my mouth.

The one who came out was Umino Masachika.

Umino Masachika was crying.

It had really been a while since I last saw an adult crying. Since the time my mother cried ten years ago on the night of the storm. While wailing unbecomingly in a way that resembled his daughter, Mokuzu, Umino Masachika came out unsteadily. He headed toward the garage. He didn't look like he was going to lock the entranceway. Was Umino Masachika going to go somewhere? Was he going to run away somewhere? Why? He pulled a small suitcase for traveling, and after putting it in the car while crying, he went in the driver's seat, there was a loud exhaust sound, and he drove off. And then he disappeared with his stylish foreign car.

I looked up at the white house.

Two hours had passed already. It was weird. I timidly went near the entranceway. It wasn't locked, so even while wondering exactly where Umino Masachika went, I opened the door.

At the entrance, there was only one pair of shoes. They were the black loafers Mokuzu had been wearing.

“Mokuzu.....?”

I called for Mokuzu.

There was no response.

I took off my shoes and went in the house. Even while wondering what I would do if Umino Masachika came back, I ran through the hallway and searched the house. Mokuzu? Mokuzu? Where are you? I remembered the time Mokuzu spoke challengingly.

<This time, no one will be able to see though it. I'll completely become bubbles.>

Was this Mokuzu's second illusion? Was Mokuzu messing around at a time like this? I searched the house, but Mokuzu wasn't anywhere. And then suddenly, I thought maybe Mokuzu hid near the entrance and went outside after I went in. I returned to the entranceway in a hurry, but Mokuzu's small, black shoes were still there. I started searching the house again. A long time passed, and I wandered around the spacious house, but I couldn't find Mokuzu.

When I tried going to the bathroom, there was kind of a.....raw-like smell. In the bathtub, something I saw before was set against the wall.

It was a machete.

It was gleaming with fat.

The whole bathroom was wet.

“.....Mokuzu?”

Suddenly, I thought Mokuzu was here. I looked up at the tiles of the bathroom, looked up at the ceiling, looked round and round, and said,

“Mokuzu? Mokuzu?”

I put my head in my hands and said,

“Mokuzu!”

“.....What are you doing?”

There was a low voice. I screamed and turned around. I didn't know when he came back, but Umino Masachika was standing there. I kept screaming, but seeing Umino Masachika look at me like he was troubled, I finally regained calm and said,

“Is Mokuzu-san here?”

“.....No. What are you doing in my house?”

“But, her shoes are here. I saw her going in the house before.”

“I didn't see her. Go home. When Mokuzu comes back, I'll tell you.”

My arm was pulled and I went out of the Umino house's bathroom. I lost my footing. When I looked up, I saw a tear fall from the side of Umino Masachika's face again. That moment, I had a very bad feeling, and shook.

I became flustered and thought I had to say something, I had to ask something. Umino Masachika was pulling my arm to get me out of the house. Going

down the hallway, the entranceway came nearer and nearer. I saw Mokuzu's black shoes.

An idea came to me.

"U-Um....."

I said in a trembling voice. My teeth chattered. Umino Masachika looked at me with his emotionless eyes and, simply shed tears.

"Th-Th.....There's a quiz my Oniichan told me."

"A *quiz*?"

"Yes."

With a trembling voice, while my teeth chattered, I started asking the quiz that was bad to get right.

"There was a married couple somewhere, and they were happy, but the husband suddenly died."

".....How?"

"Who knows? I think it was an accident or an illness or something. Um, that isn't related to the story."

"Ah, I see. And?"

"Okay, the couple had one child. And then at the husband's funeral, the husband's coworker came. And, that man, who was the coworker, and the wife, who became a widow, got along. They a-attracted each other. But you see, that night, the wife suddenly kills her child. Why do you think she did it?"

Umino Masachika, who heard this quiz most people couldn't get right, nodded. Then he said,

"Because I miss you."

"Eh.....?"

"Isn't it because, she wanted to meet him?"

Umino Masachika said simply.

He was right.

The answer to the quiz was, 'She wanted to meet him.'

If there was another funeral, she could meet the man again. Thinking that, to have another funeral, the wife killed the child. Because 'she wanted to meet him' again was the answer.

The third verse of Umino Masachika's debut song, 'Mermaid's Bones,' started playing in my head. That sentimental song. A soft ballad. That song for which only the third verse was weird.

I reached the entrance and was pushed outside. The door started closing. I yelled at Umino Masachika.

"What did you do to Mokuzu?"

Umino Masachika didn't answer.

He just kept shedding tears.

"What happened to her!?"

".....She became...bubbles in...the sea."

After Umino Masachika said that, the entrance closed. I clung to the door and yelled.

"Liar! Liar!"

The entranceway was quiet after that, and didn't seem like it would open no matter how much I yelled. There was nothing I could do but give up. I ran and went back to my home.

On the dark road at night, as I went back, I dreamed that Mokuzu would suddenly show up and say, "Tadah." Mokuzu didn't appear. While breathing hard, I went home and opened the entrance.

".....Oh."

My mom raised her face and said,  
“You're late. Your teacher is here.”

There was a pair of man's shoes at the entranceway.

In front of the table, the homeroom teacher was sitting straight. There was tea and tea cakes on the table, and the TV was on.

The fusuma at the end was closed.

I took off my shoes, went past my mom and the homeroom teacher, and opened the fusuma. Tomohiko, who had headphones on and was watching a DVD of a complicated-looking SF movie, slowly turned back. When he saw me, he took off his headphones hurriedly and said, “What's wrong, Nagisa?”

“Oniichan, I think, I think.....”

“Nagisa?”

My mom and the homeroom teacher held their breath and looked at me. I held my head in my hands and yelled.

“Mokuzu was killed by her dad!”

Without caring that my mom and homeroom teacher tried to stop me, I ran to the police station and talked to the police. But no one listened to me. The rumors of abuse and Mokuzu's bruises. The wet machete at the bathroom and the girl who disappeared from her house. My talking about her doing a illusion became a bottleneck and,

“That girl is probably playing around with you. You'll know when you go to school,”

said the police, and my mom, who came after me, and my homeroom teacher said the same thing. My mom

“It's well known recently that Umino Masachika's daughter is a liar.”

used a rumor and remonstrated me. My teacher said,

“You're nervous about your future right now. That's why.”

They both went by my sides and pulled me away from the police station. It became late, and everyone was exhausted. The paddy fields where the ears of rice swayed sank darkly into the darkness and were like the sea on that night. The cold smell of the rain still hung in the air of the town.

I returned home while crying and thought about the disappearance of my important friend, Umino Mokuzu, which only I was certain of.

I opened the fusuma and went into Tomohiko's room. Then I sat on Tomohiko's bed and put my head in my hands. Tomohiko was quietly sitting in his chair and listening to music. I sat without moving an inch. My belief that Mokuzu wasn't here anymore seized and tortured me. No one realized that. Mokuzu was.....

One or two hours passed. Tomohiko was listening to music silently, but Tomohiko, who had the sense of a sometimes merciful, sometimes cruel God who was an observer of fate, finally tilted his head and looked at me.

“Nagisa.”

“.....”

“Did that girl die?”

I nodded.

“.....Yeah, I think so. No one will listen to me, though.”

“If that's what you think, I'll believe you.”

I raised my head.

Tomohiko was looking at me fixedly.

“Nagisa, tell me.”

“Okay.....”

Then I started saying what I thought.

The dismembered body of the dog that I saw on Mount Nina didn't leave my mind. It was about how he killed the dog he cared for by hitting it with a block, divided it with a machete because he couldn't move it, and threw it away in the mountain. And just now. Umino Mokuzu, who went in her house, disappeared like an illusion. The one who from the house after a while was only Umino Masachika. When I searched the house after he went, Mokuzu had disappeared. And in the bathroom was a machete that seemed like it had just been used.

At that time, Umino Masachika had a small suitcase for traveling. I thought he would run away somewhere, but he came back to his house quickly.

The only thing other than Umino Masachika that went out of the house was that trunk. And there was the machete that seemed to have been used.

—When I talked up to that point, I felt bad, put my

head on top Tomohiko's lap, and became limp. Tomohiko didn't respond. I became out of breath and said to Tomohiko,

“.....You don't believe it, do you?”

“.....”

“None of the adults listened. None of the adults were worried about Mokuzu, and said things like it's because she's a liar, and it's because she's a strange girl. They laugh at me, who's worried about her. But.....”

Tomohiko was making a serious expression. He wasn't a child or an adult. Tomohiko, who had the 'View of God' and didn't live his own life, unlike his usual self, was looking down at me with a concerned expression. Then suddenly, he said in a direct way that wasn't like him,

“Nagisa, let's go.”

“.....Wha?”

I asked.

“Go? Where?”

“Mount Nina.”

While lying limply on top of Tomohiko's lap, I looked up at Tomohiko. Tomohiko was looking for a rubber band to tie his hair. After he tied his long, silky hair, he stood up and opened the fusuma.

He cut through the kitchen and looked for his shoes at the entranceway. He found sneakers and tried to wear them, but the size didn't seem to match, and he tsked and threw it. He found something like beach sandals, wore them, and opened the door.

I followed him hurriedly.

It was still dark outside. There was still a little time until daybreak.

For the first time in three years, Tomohiko took a step outside.

Then after he two, three steps unsteadily, he shook his head, faced down, and hurled magnificently on the road.

“Oehhhhh!”

“Ooooniichan?”

“.....I'm all right.”

Tomohiko walked unsteadily.

When I thought that, he stopped, and again,

“Oehhhhh!”

“Uwaan, Oniichan!”

“.....No, I'm really, really all right.”

Tomohiko, who turned around, was making a smile that was unlike him. At that moment, I felt like someone passed by me even though no one was there, and turned around.

The dark, asphalt road. The black road that was by between ears of rice and was still wet.

Something went away on it. I felt like for a moment, I saw something like a dark pink fog. Something went away from Tomohiko and me.

The only one who noticed it was me. Tomohiko walked unsteadily. He turned his back on the dark pink something and was unsteady.

The mist went away from Tomohiko too.

I was standing still in a daze, but finally came to my

senses, and hurriedly went after Tomohiko.

## Final Chapter

### Can't meet the Sugar Candy Bullet Anymore

∴

The morning of October 4—  
like this, came upon me.

Even now, I'm holding hands with  
Tomohiko and walking up Mount Nina  
unsteadily.

Tomohiko, who became better after  
hurling once, walks up the mountain step  
by step.

I keep thinking. I hope it's just that I'm  
thinking too much.

(Mokuzu.....

Mokuzu, I hope your body isn't there.

At that place on Mount Nina where your  
dog was thrown away.

Like you said, the storm did come. I hope  
you returned to being a mermaid, laid  
eggs with your allies in the sea, and will  
promise you'll come back ten years, and

scatter to other seas.

Ahh, I hope that story's true.....!)

∴

The slope of Mount Nina became more and more steep, the chilliness increased, and the air was white and misty. I felt cold. Even though the sun was becoming brighter little by little, we were shaking a little.

Far off, I could see the sea below me. The waves were strong, and I could hear the white foam hit the tetrapods and break.

Tomohiko and I gradually became quiet, and for the last ten minutes, we just advanced through the animal trail without talking at all. Then finally, we came to the slightly open place that I remembered.

It was full of a somewhat raw-like, animal smell. Tomohiko stopped walking and sniffed the wind. Then he made a serious expression and said to me,

“You stay here. I'll go look.”

“Ye-ah.....”

Tomohiko slowly advanced, and when he went to a place that seemed to be like a small

hill made of leaves, for a long time, he didn't come back. I stood still without doing anything and waited for Tomohiko to come back. When Tomohiko finally came back while stepping on the soil, he looked down at me with a very sad face.

“Let's go down.”

“.....Go down?”

Tomohiko shook his head.

“Let's go down the mountain.”

“Why?”

“We have to tell the police.”

Tomohiko slowly turned to the hill. Then, when I turned my head and tried to look, he covered my eyes with his hands.

“There's a dead girl who's been dismembered.”

“Mokuzu!”

“It's probably that girl. She had black hair and big eyes, and was very pretty. But right now, she has a very terrible expression. It's better if you don't look. Nagisa, this.....”

Tomohiko reservedly held out a piece of paper.

I took it.

The edge was wet with blood and some

other liquid, and in the middle, with crappy handwriting, 'goodbye, mokuzu,' was written. I yelled 'Ahh.' It was the same handwriting as the 'goodbye, pochi' that was gently put on top of the body of the dog that was cut into pieces. I had the feeling that the one who put the paper there was Mokuzu. But I was wrong. These poorly written, shaky letters were that bizarre ballad's creator, Umino Masachika's letters.

I ignored Tomohiko and ran.

The fallen leaves were wet and had clumped together, and made dull noises as I stepped on them.

I heard a bird cry somewhere.

I ran to what was stacked there, stopped, and looked.

Then, I looked at my split up and neatly piled up, now immobile friend. Mokuzu had her eyes wide open and with a sad expression that was like she was scared, like she had given up, she was frozen in time. It was an expression I saw before.

Buzz..... A big fly flew around.

<You're covered with bruises.  
Umino.....you're dirty.>

I remembered Kanajima's voice.

It was just half a day ago, in that storm.

<You should become dirty too!>

I turned toward Tomohiko. Tomohiko was, unlike himself, looked at me like he was at a loss. I yelled.

“Oniichan! Umino Mokuzu died! She was killed by her crazy father!”

Tomohiko took my hand, and protecting his sobbing sister, went down the mountain. We went to the police station early in the morning. I cried, shook, and couldn't talk, and in my place, Tomohiko, while blushing and stammering, somehow explained to the police that we found a body.

From the time Tomohiko went out of our home for me, hurled in front of the entranceway, and walked out unsteadily, it seemed he lost the special power 'View of God' that he gained while living in seclusion. Right now, Tomohiko was clumsy, couldn't talk properly, had a hard time just looking the adults who came out in the eye, and was sweating. A kind policewoman offered coffee to Tomohiko. Tomohiko held my shoulders to protect me and kept talking, and when he

finished explaining, made a hiccuping sound. Then tears fell from his eyes like waterfalls.

A detective gathered policemen and moved hurriedly, and Tomohiko, like a seventeen year old who releasing the feelings he held back for three years, kept crying. When he cried, Tomohiko was very pretty, strongly stimulated people's motherly instincts, and was visual kei, and young policewomen took turns wiping Tomohiko's tears, patting my head, and left strawberry flavor chocolate bars, candy, gum, and sesame seed crackers. Tomohiko, who was not a god anymore, was frail, powerless like a normal seventeen year old, and was like how he was when he held his sister in his arms and patted her head and held her before in the summer festival. Suddenly, I noticed that Oniichan came back after three years.

Maybe.....that thing I passed when I walked out of the house, that dark pink fog was the <sup>candy</sup>god that Tomohiko got in exchange for his living and future and friends and love.

I thought about the god that disappeared for a while. I didn't know where that pink thing came from.

After a while, detectives who looked like



they came from another station came, and made Tomohiko repeat what he said. Tomohiko blushed again, stammered, stuttered, and while moving his gaze without calm at the wall and floor and me and his own hands, somehow explained. Tomohiko's live round was unreliable. But it had all his might. Before long, there was a message that a body was found on Mount Nina, and in the room we were in, people like my mom, the homeroom teacher, who seemed to be in a daze after having woken up, and various people entered. The two of them saw Tomohiko sobbing and me being limp, and jumped. Seeing us, who were together and wouldn't let go of each other, my mom became flustered, took a deep breath, became flustered again, and said,

“Is it true? That Umino-san's daughter died.....”

We didn't answer. We couldn't talk anymore. Then, my mom said,

“I-I-I wonder if it's modern illness. Everyone's distorted, aren't they.....?”

“What're you saying!”

The homeroom teacher, who was standing still half asleep, suddenly yelled at my mom.

“Don't say something like a stupid critic! What do you mean illness, distortion? It doesn't have anything to do with that! People who kill kids are crazy! Isn't that all!? There's nothing fucking modern about it.”

My mom, who was yelled at, shrank, and after saying that, the homeroom teacher rubbed his sleepy-looking eyes and stood still for a while. And then he sat on a sofa, yelled, “Ahh!” and put his head in his hands.

For a few minutes, no one talked, and only silence ran in the room.

Someone suddenly sobbed.

Who.....?

I looked around the room while being held by my brother. On the floor between the legs of the homeroom teacher, who was facing down and had his head in his hands, a big drop of something fell. It was a tear that seemed salty. The homeroom teacher said,

“They were trying to do things too.”

“Trying to do things.....? Sensei, what do you mean?”

Hearing my shaking voice, the homeroom teacher raised his head.

Twisting his face with frustration, he wrung

out,

“There were rumors and reports by the neighbors. They consulted the child consultation center. But, when they talked to Umino herself, she defended her father, so it didn't go anywhere.”

It's Stockholm syndrome, a mistaken function of the brain, I thought.

“But they were trying to gain custody. Because I thought I was an adult, a teacher, Superman. As for you, I didn't care if you hated me, I tried to get you into high school. I was planning on doing something with the Umino family too. A hero always comes in on time. That's how it's supposed to be. But it was different. I can't believe a student died.”

“Sensei.....”

The homeroom teacher scratched his head and groaned in frustration.

“Ahh, Umino, you could have become an adult if you lived through.....”

His voice sounded like it was wrung out.

“But Umino, did you have the will to live through.....?”

It became evening we finally left the police

station. It seemed like the incident was reported widely, and there were a lot of people from TV stations. We quietly went out the backdoor and went home. I tried finding mineral water at a convenience store along the way and bought it. For this town, which was at the foot of the Chugoku mountain range, the snowmelt became tap water which tasted good to drink by itself. No one bought mineral water, which cost the same as juice. It was something city people drank. I opened the cap and like Umino Mokuzu, lifted my chin and glug glug glug glug.....drank it. Water trickled from my mouth and spilled on my neck. It didn't taste that good. It had a weird, mineral taste. It felt like no matter how much of this I drank, my thirst wouldn't be quenched, and while moving the bottle of mineral water from my lips, I thought, 'Ahh, this was how Umino Mokuzu was.'

Umino Masachika was arrested, pleaded guilty comparatively easily, and how he cried and was sad for his daughter was shown on the news and on talk and variety shows for days. With really bad taste, Umino Masachika's

debut song, 'Mermaid's Bones,' rose in the charts again, and everyone, although it was late, noticed that the third verse of this sentimental ballad was slightly bizarre. Commentators jumped in on that like it was obvious, and were excited for days. But no matter what anyone said, Mokuzu wouldn't come back. It seemed like only a few people knew that. Umino Masachika. Me. Tomohiko. And Sensei.

After I rested for around ten days and came back to school, there was a strange mood. The classroom was strangely quiet, the social world didn't talk much, and Kanajima and I seemed a little out of place.

After a few days passed, little by little, Eiko started talking to me. She talked about TV, like, "Did you see that yesterday?" hair, how to curl your eyelashes, and how many toothpicks you could put on top of them, in other words, light things that didn't really matter. When I answered normally, Eiko looked relieved. Then she looked a little like she was going to cry, and became quiet. It seemed she was worried. There was kindness in the social world too.

When I came back from school, Tomohiko

started coming out from his room and making dinner with me. He cut lettuce unskillfully and put dressing on them. He cooked pork and kimchi and put soy sauce on them. Tomohiko was pretty good at cooking. One day, after I came back from school, Tomohiko had cut his long hair and the length was close to a buzz cut. I yelled, "Uwaa!" Because Tomohiko had been going out recently, his skin was a little sunburned, his shoulders became broader, and he was like a normal guy I didn't know. The beautiful god that descended into my brother and stepped elegantly on top of the clouds was gone without a trace. As Autumn was passing, it seemed my brother was thinking about something, but he suddenly became a soldier. Before me, in my place, he entered the local SDF. It was surprising. When I asked, "Oniichan, a-are you sure?" Tomohiko asked curiously, "What do you mean?" He came back on breaks and while eating rice bowls, Tomohiko asked me about school and TV. He was my reliable, beautiful, kind Oniichan.

I lost Umino Mokuzu, who I met, in the blink of an eye, lost the Tomohiko who was a god, and when I noticed it, there wasn't one

person who shot sweet bullets. Mokuzu disappeared, and Tomohiko shot actual live rounds. According to rumors, Tomohiko was very fast at disassembling machine guns, cleaning them, and putting back together, and he did it elegantly and it “looked like he was dancing with the machine gun.” The friend he brought with him from his unit one day, said that. Tomohiko seemed to be called <The Young Noble of Machine Guns>, and as his sister I didn't know what to think about it.

That was why  
no one—

No one shot sugar candy bullets anymore.

They didn't throw mineral water at me or call bruises pollution.

They didn't say they would run away with me.

My hair grew more and more, I grew taller, and as if to take the place of Tomohiko, who started looking more like a guy, I started

looking more like a girl. One day, when I looked in the mirror, I strangely resembled Tomohiko when he had long hair and was thin, and I was surprised.

I'll go to high school. We aren't rich, so it'll be hard, but I'll work part time after school, get a job after I graduate, and it'll probably work out. The homeroom teacher was watching out so I wouldn't change my mind.

Even today, in the news, children are being killed. I realized that it seemed it wasn't a very rare thing in the world. Only the children who survive become adults. Sensei murmured that that day in the room in the police station, but maybe Sensei was a survivor too. Sensei, who survived and became an adult, ran about for children today too, and succeeded at times, and didn't make it at times. And he kept quiet about himself.

I might become like that too.

I'll probably become a Japanese person who pretends that there was no violence or loss or pain, and acts normally. I don't want to become a rotten adult who talks about the death of her friend in a bar like it was a medal from her

childhood with pity. I get the feeling that I'll become an adult without being able to do anything about the feelings in my chest. But I'm thirteen years old, and there are other soldiers who are fighting while shooting weird things with their weapons, and I think that the fact that there were children who lived and children who died is something I'll never forget.

I won't forget.

In the list of the ones who died in the war, with the names of the children I don't know who are in places I don't know, inconspicuously, is Umino Mokuzu's name. Mokuzu was killed by her parent. By her actual parent, who she loved, adored, and expected to be loved back.

Things like that happen sometimes in this world. Children can't fight against the world with sugar candy <sup>lollypops</sup> bullets.

My soul knows that.

## あとがき

初めまして、の方には初めまして。桜庭一樹さくらばかずきです。『砂糖菓子さとうがしの弾丸だんがんは撃ちぬけない

Lolypop or A Bullet』をお送りします。よろしくです。いつもは富士見ミステリー文庫で『GOSICK』というシリーズを書いています。三巻まで発売されているほか、『ファンタジア バトルロイヤル』で短編も連載中ですので、そちらもぜひよろしくお願いします。

ところでこの本は『GOSICK』三巻を書いた後にとつぜん書きたくなり、わりと一瞬で書き上げてしまつて「書きちゃったけどどうしたものか……」と困りつつ、とりあえず担当のK藤さんに出会い頭にどさっと渡してみました。すると「あら、ありがとう」と受け取られ、つぎの日にメールで「T木編集長が出すって。イラストどうしよっか？」とあれよあれよという間に今月出ることが決まりました。なのでいまちよっと戸惑とまどっていてうれPけどなにを書いたらいいかわからない……スペースもないしでちよっとおろおろ気味……。

そうだ……！ 海野藻屑うみのもくずちゃんをつくったきっかけを書きます。

中一ちゅういちのときにわたしのクラスにここには書けないけどすごいへんな名前の女の子がいて、

そいつはわたしが『小説家志望の女の子』なのを知ると「となりの島根県に女流作家がいるよ」と教えてくれて、その女流作家と交換日記できるように計らってくれました。それでくる日もくる日も交換日記を続けたのですが、ある日わたしは放課後の教室に忘れ物を取りに行つて、見てしまいました。そいつが……ものすごい一生懸命、自分とは別の筆跡で、別の人格になりきって、長い長い日記を書いているところを……っておまえだったのかい!?

わたしにばれたのを察すると彼女の日記は、自分と仮装人格の女流作家が入り混じってどんなオカシクなり、なぜか命がけの勢いで嘘を貫こうとし、気圧されたわたしは「もう知ってるから、いいよ」の一言が言えないまま奇妙な交換日記をその後もずっと続けました。

その後も、高校でも、大学でも、わたしはときどき、顔がすぐくかわいくてもものすごい嘘つきだけどぜったいにほっとけない、みたいなおかしな女の子と繰り返し出会いました。それだと思ったのは「壊れるにもセンスって大事だよなあ」みたいなことでした。ビバ変人!

今作品の出版に当たって、今回も関係各位の方にお世話になりました。そして手に取ってくれた読者の方にも、ありがとうございます。またお会いしましょう! 桜庭でした。

桜庭 一樹

〈桜庭一樹オフィシャルサイト [SCHEHERAZADE] <http://sakuraba.if.tv/>〉



富士見ミステリー文庫

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さとうがし だんがん う  
砂糖菓子<sup>さとうがし</sup>の弾丸<sup>だんがん</sup>は撃ちぬけない<sup>う</sup>  
A Lollypop or A Bullet

桜庭一樹 さくらばかずき

平成16年11月15日 初版発行

平成19年7月30日 十一版発行

発行者——山下直久

発行所——富士見書房

〒102-8144 東京都千代田区富士見1-12-14

電話 編集 (03)3238-8585 営業 (03)3238-8531

振替 00170-5-86044

印刷所——暁印刷

製本所——BBC

装丁者——朝倉哲也

造本には万全の注意を払っておりますが、  
万一、落丁・乱丁などありましたら、お取り替えます。  
定価はカバーに明記してあります。禁無断転載

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ISBN4-8291-6276-7 C 0193

# 富士見ヤングミステリー大賞 作品募集中!

## 21世紀のホームズはきみが創る!

「富士見ヤングミステリー大賞」は既存のミステリーにとらわれないフレッシュな物語を求めています。感覚を研ぎ澄ませて、きみの隣にある不思議を描いてみよう。鍵はあなたの「想像力」です——。

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月刊ドラゴンマガジン編集部

### ●内容

読んでいてときどきするような、冒険心に満ち魅力あるキャラクターが活躍するミステリー小説およびホラー小説。ただし、自作未発表のものに限ります。

### ●規定枚数

400字詰め原稿用紙250枚以上400枚以内

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## **Credits**

Translation/Editing: kamyu  
Special Thanks: Maple Colours